

Between Gods and Mortals: Divinity, Mortality, and Religious Ritual in Euripides

By

Mary Clare Dolinar

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Classics)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2019

Date of final oral examination: 08/27/2019

This dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Laura McClure, Professor, CANES

Jeffrey Beneker, Professor, CANES

William Brockliss, Associate Professor, CANES

Emily Fletcher, Associate Professor, Philosophy

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For Brian, who has always believed in me
and for Cecilia and Simon, my greatest joys

Contents

Chapter 1: Ritual and Religious Status in Euripides	1
Preliminary Objections.....	2
Perspectives on Religion in Euripides	6
Theoretical Approaches to Greek Religion	11
Practice and Status: A New Model of Euripidean Religion	15
Case Studies	21
Chapter 2: Wrestling Death: Mortality and Immortality in <i>Alcestis</i>	23
Critical Considerations: Content and Genre, Psychology and Divinity	24
Apollo’s Incomplete Intervention	36
Mortal Rituals in Life and Death	44
Heracles’ Double Melody.....	57
Conclusion.....	69
Chapter 3: Ritual Authority and Invention in <i>Iphigenia in Tauris</i>	71
Critical Considerations: Plot, Aetiologies and Divine Will.....	73
Divine Use of Ritual.....	77
Ritual and Marginality.....	83
Power Over Ritual, Power Through Ritual	94
The Divine Object of Ritual	103
Conclusion.....	108
Chapter 4: Madness, Death, and Divinity in <i>Heracles</i>	110
Critical Considerations: Myth, Structure, and Morality	110
Emphasis on Heracles’ status, semi-divinity:.....	116
The Altars of Zeus	123
The Deus ex Machina	130
Criticizing and Rejecting the Gods	140
Conclusion.....	146
Chapter 5: The Intermediacy and Ritual Participation of Dionysus.....	148
Critical Considerations: Dionysian Tragedies and Dionysian Cult.....	150
Dionysus Between Worlds	154
Semele Ablaze.....	163

Ritual and Status: Acting and Becoming 170

Conclusion..... 179

Conclusions 181

Bibliography 185

Chapter 1: Ritual and Religious Status in Euripides

Euripides is known for his powerful depictions of the mortal struggle in a world where divine justice and fate are often inscrutable. Gods appear largely at the margins of his extant plays, explaining their role in the crisis at hand or dispensing directions to resolve it and move forward. The involvement of the gods often seems abrupt, distant, even disconnected from the world and drama of the mortal characters. However, the tragedies of Euripides are also brimming with ritual and religious statuses that significantly influence his characters and their circumstances. These practices, prayers, priesthoods, and so on, are a valuable resource for scholars developing a fuller understanding of historical 5th-century Greek religion. But they also merit serious consideration for their role within the tragedies themselves. This project proposes a new understanding of Euripidean religion as a cohesive system involving both mortals and gods as part of the same interconnected network. Although humans and gods are clearly divided in separate spheres in this system, they are invested in the same practices, follow the same broad rules of status, and interact within and between their spheres in the same ritual framework. Additionally, the rules of Euripidean religion create a dynamic network in which religious status and ritual practice mutually inform one another and an action or change in status can have far-reaching effects. This is especially evident in the case of certain liminal characters who already embody the fluidity of the mortal-divine boundary as well as those put in exceptional circumstances by some divine act. Their special, quasi-divine statuses allow them to exert influence through ritual that affects the world around them, other characters, and their own status. The combination of status and ritual leads, in many Euripidean tragedies, to mortals experiencing some level of divine influence or status.

Preliminary Objections

Any interpretation of the religious elements of Greek literature invites several objections against reading into the works what is not there. Some argue that poets use the gods due to convention, or as dramatic techniques to achieve their ends. Others, that details of religion reflect cultural practices and beliefs, and so are more suited to historical understanding than literary interpretation. Still others, that our own modern Western religious culture prevents us from understanding the religious culture of pre-Christian Greece, and our readings are doomed to error. Before I go into detail about my arguments regarding Euripides and religion, I will address these objections individually. In particular, I wish to establish that Euripides' portrayal of gods and religion differs from other authors enough to suggest it is not mere convention; that dramatic technique and meaningful interpretation are not mutually exclusive; that an author may comment on and creatively use his cultural background even as he reflects it; and that although our own cultural background creates barriers to our full understanding of another culture's art, nevertheless we can and should aim to understand the other culture so as to better interpret its art, and interpret its art so as to better understand the culture.

That Greek authors choose to portray the gods and religion in a variety of ways rather than simply following convention is no new idea. There are, for example, readings on the difference between Homeric and Hesiodic divine justice; and, in fact, Iliadic and Odyssean divine justice.¹ The manner of divine epiphanies differs markedly between genres (Vernant 1991, 42-43). Others point out the consistency of religious language between authors and genres - and

¹ For example, Lloyd-Jones 1983b, 28-30; Kullman 1985; and Huebeck 1988, 23. *Contra* Allan 2006, 1-35.

there is certainly a good deal of consistency - but even these arguments acknowledge that changes in perspective and focus leave different impressions of the gods.² No portrayal, of course, is entirely or even primarily literary.³ Still, the abundance of variations in the telling of Greek myths, often thought to be created by authors, illustrates the extent of authors' freedom to adjust aspects of their religion for their own purposes. Euripides' use of gods in particular is markedly different from that of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Most measurably, the gods simply appear more frequently in Euripides' tragedies than the others'.⁴ The many character speeches challenging or questioning the gods (an interpretive problem I will later cover in more detail) also set this tragedian apart. Finally, Euripides also includes many cult aetiologies honoring both gods and mortal or semi-divine heroes. These aetiologies are of interest both for their potential as evidence for historical cult practice and for the interpretation of religious interactions and divine status in the plays.

Perhaps the most common objection against interpretation of the gods in tragedy is that their presence is a dramatic technique expected or required of the tragedians, and that to find meaning beyond this would be over-interpretation. The *deus ex machina* responsible for many divine appearances is undeniably a plot device, and some argue that these scenes, at least, should be seen primarily as technique and not heavily interpreted. But Wildberg, who espouses this

² See Lloyd-Jones 1956 on the consistency between Homer, Hesiod, and Aeschylus; see Allan 2006 for an argument of consistency between Homer's epics, and bibliography on the topic.

³ Gould encourages readers to understand Greek religion as a "language" for understanding the world, which Homer uses to address his readers; the language is developed and understood by the author's society, not contrived by the author (1985, 25).

⁴ Lefkowitz 1989, 70; Wildberg stresses that his use of the gods, because of its relative frequency, cannot be discounted as mere convention (1999-2000b, 245).

view, adds that what he calls “integral epiphanies” of gods outside this framework - in particular he mentions *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae* - provide more room for interpretation and religious understanding (1999-2000, 245-46). To this I will add two points. First, Euripides does not merely follow formulaic convention; he expands on, amends, parallels, and otherwise uses it in inventive ways. I will focus my study more on these departures from convention than on the convention itself, insofar as convention can be determined when so much tragedy does not survive.⁵ The apparent variations and inventions seem to invite further attention. But even the conventional *deus ex machina* need not be a wasteland for interpretive meaning. Such a scene is typical but not required for a tragedy’s conclusion, and Euripides includes them at a much higher rate than Aeschylus or Sophocles.⁶ Second, there is a great deal to be said about the religious world of Euripides beyond simply the appearance of gods. The speech and prayers of mortals, and their roles and actions in worship or service of the gods, all contribute to a more complete understanding of Euripidean religion.

In the opposite direction is the objection that religious elements of Greek tragedy are dictated by historical religious reality and that their study should focus on better understanding Greek religious practice, rather than any literary interpretation. There is undoubtedly a great deal

⁵ Mastronarde addresses the question of convention in tragedy at length. Tragedy in 5th-century Athens is experimental to begin with, and by nature the genre contains a great deal of variety in meter, language, plot, and themes. So Euripides is hardly alone in being innovative as a tragedian. And as so much tragedy has not survived, there is no way to assess the degree to which Euripides introduced new plots or ideas in his works, and how much he drew from his contemporaries and predecessors. But based on what does survive, it is sufficient to say that Euripides does take advantage of the variety and flexibility of his genre. He uses artistic and mythic variants that differ from those of other known tragedies, whether or not they were entirely his inventions (2010, 47-54).

⁶ We are of course limited in such statements by the scarcity of extant plays, but to the best of our knowledge the *deus ex machina* as epilogue is considered particularly Euripidean. See for example discussions of Heracles’ appearance in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* as compared to divine appearances in Euripides (Webster 1974, 7 and 156; Pucci 1994 *passim*). Mastronarde gives a detailed list of all known divine appearances on the rooftop or crane, which can further illustrate the point (1990, 280-90).

to be learned about Greek religion from Euripides; Mikalson's *Honor Thy Gods* is one example of such a project, and there is a long scholastic tradition of exploring the link between myth and ritual.⁷ But as Sourvinou-Inwood argues, tragedy presents distortions of religion rather than accurate representations of real practice. She terms them "exploratory constructs" that facilitate new considerations of cult. Similarly, Segal sees the interactions between mortals and gods in Euripides as an opportunity to confront the problem of anthropomorphized gods.⁸ Sourvinou-Inwood cautions that the divine-human interactions are religious reality, not literary construct; but as with cult practice, the reality is open to comment and invention (1997, 184). The religious world of Euripides' tragedies, then, is one based on his experienced world but created by his literary mind. I will explore how the poet's religious world functions, considering its relationship to the Greek religious world, and how it relates to the meaning and interpretation of the tragedies as a whole.

One final and undeniable problem with the question of religion in tragedy is that the modern, Western religious tradition is so firmly ingrained in our minds that it can be easy to make assumptions about Greek religion that would have been completely foreign to its followers.⁹ There is no way around this; the best I can do is to proceed with a cautious awareness

⁷ Mikalson 1991; see Burkert for an overview and sources on the "myth and ritual" problem (1983, 29-34). While the two are closely associated, the relationship is not one of direct causality.

⁸Sourvinou-Inwood 1997, 175; Segal 1999-2000, 274. Note that Sourvinou-Inwood's argument refers to cult practices represented (and sometimes invented) in Euripides, while Segal's concerns the presence and interactions of the gods. I will consider both of these as aspects of Euripidean religion, and so it is helpful to establish that both can be seen as comments on historical Greek religion.

⁹ For example, Burkert notes that attempts to understand mystery cults have often taken Christianity as a point of reference, and as result have misunderstood them by failing to take into account the major differences between these cults and Christian churches (1987, 3). Price warns against the tendency to "impose alien values" on Greek religion (1999, 3).

of my bias. I will strictly avoid any comparisons, no matter how interesting, to Judeo-Christian parallels in belief or practice. Likewise I will attempt not to use language with particular ties to modern Western religion, unless alternative language would be prohibitively cumbersome.¹⁰ My intention in doing so will be to keep the focus on Greek religion without defining it in relationship to any other. I will also begin with a discussion of models of Greek religious theory, including the polis model and the thin coherence and network models.¹¹ These models will aid in our understanding of Euripides' religious surroundings, and the system in which his characters were written to function.

Perspectives on Religion in Euripides

There are first of all a number of different aspects of religion that scholars have focused on in their interpretations of Euripides. These include human characters' beliefs about the nature and justice of the gods; the presence and actions of divine figures onstage; the ritual actions performed or discussed; and the cults followed or established in the course of the tragedies. These aspects overlap and complement one another, and it is my belief that none can be well understood except in relationship to the others. As I discuss prior scholarship on Euripidean religion, I will classify it according to two general categories: the religious status of individuals - this includes divinity/mortality but also an individual's role as cult member, servant of a god, priest, subordinate or master of other gods, and other religiously defined roles; and the religious

¹⁰ So, for example, 'god', 'divine', and 'mortal' are bland enough and awkward to replace; but 'divine intervention,' though it is an apt description of some gods' appearances, evokes too strongly the idea of an Abrahamic God's miracle.

¹¹ As put forth by Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a (polis model), Kindt 2012 (thin coherence) and Eidinow 2011 (network).

actions taken by individuals - prayer, sacrifice, cult worship, interaction with another character in a religious setting, and things done in the context of a person's religious status. I will discuss my definition of religion in more detail later; but I set it out now so that I can identify various interpretations of Euripides as they fit in my rubric.

A great deal of scholarship has focused on what belief about the gods Euripides expresses through the words of mortals and the behavior of gods in his tragedies. Is the poet presenting an atheistic viewpoint when one of his characters expresses doubt that the gods are as the myths say? Does the suffering brought about by divine actions amount to a criticism of the gods? Or does Euripides reaffirm the traditional view of the gods when he brings them in on the machine to restore order?¹² The trouble with such questions is the tendency to speculate on the author's own views, which are unknowable. More recent scholarship has re-directed the problem of religious belief in several ways. Allan emphasizes the distance between the gods of literature and the gods of belief. While he concedes that they can challenge the audience's attitudes toward their religious beliefs, he prefers to see Euripides' gods as agents with power and personality (2000, 236). Wildberg defers the question to the "authorial character," maintaining that while Euripides' own beliefs are "intrinsically unanswerable," he presents a certain worldview whose religious preconceptions can be understood through the text (1999-2000, 237-38).

This first approach to religious criticism in Euripides does not exactly fit into my classification of Greek religion as status and actions. The elements of the tragedies used as evidence for such arguments - critical prayers and speech against the gods by mortal characters

¹² See Mikalson and Michelini for overviews of the tradition that Euripides is a critic of traditional religion (1991, 225; 1987, 3-51). Mikalson asserts the view that he reaffirms traditional piety (1991, 226-36).

and the interventions by gods into the events of the tragedies - tend to fall into the second category, religious actions. The overall question of the gods' existence and their justice could be considered a question of the religious status of the gods. But belief itself, whether that of the characters or of the author, is neither. Faith or belief does not dominate Greek religion as it does in many modern religions; instead, ritual practice plays a central role.¹³ So beyond the problem of unknowability in the matter of Euripides' beliefs, the question itself misses the mark.

Other scholars avoid the question of beliefs by focusing on the contradictions and variety of outcomes in the tragedies' religious events. Sourvinou-Inwood and Labarbe both emphasize that dark outcomes of divine actions and characters' criticisms of the gods do not amount to authorial criticism; rather, they address the problem of a world with evil and suffering, and express the emotional responses of mortals in dire circumstances (1997, 185; 1980, 146). The uncertainty of navigating the world as mortals, the irony created by the differences between mortal and divine conceptions of justice, and the great distance between mortal and divine experiences of the world, all feature prominently in this vein of interpretation.¹⁴ Religious status appears in such readings especially to emphasize the mortal-divine divide, but again the focus is on religious actions. I hope to illuminate and expand this interpretive direction by further exploring the question of religious status in Euripides and elucidating the interaction between status and action which constitutes the heart of Greek religion.

One area in which practice and status, divine and human, literature and history all intersect, is the inclusion of cult aetiologies and cult practices in the plays of Euripides. Such

¹³ Mastronarde 2010, 155; Price 1999, 3

¹⁴ For examples of such scholarship: Mastronarde 2010, Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, Allan 2000

cults are often instituted by a god in commemoration of a mortal's life or death; or mortals take on a special status as priests and participants in a cult. Gods and humans draw closer to one another by association with these institutions, while cult rituals define them in new religious roles. Most frequently, though, scholars comment on the relationship between these tragic cult aetiologies and what we know about the historical cults of ancient Greece. Based on our historical evidence it seems clear that Euripides was comfortable adjusting and even creating cults as he saw fit.¹⁵ At times, in fact, he seems to draw attention to these changes and make his inventions conspicuous (Dunn 1994, 114). Several explanations have been proposed for this creative license with religious practice. Scullion sees it as reflective of the "lack of restraint" inherent in the Greek polytheistic system. Tzanetou finds parallels between the invented Taurian cult in *Iphigenia at Tauris* and the cult of Arkeia, suggesting that the protagonists "play out" elements of real cult in a fictional setting. Similarly, Segal argues that the rituals in *Bacchae* do not follow real practice because they are intended as a reflection on the cult, rather than a participation in it.¹⁶ Others see the cult aetiologies in tragedies' conclusions as plot-driven devices meant to provide resolution - or not - to the conflicts of the plays. Thus Knox says that these rituals commemorate the protagonists' suffering, Basta Donzelli sees cult compensations as the accomplishment of *Dike* but also as an accentuated contradiction in divine and mortal sense of justice, and Lesky calls cult aetiologies one of Euripides' biggest contradictions and a violent

¹⁵ Scullion 1999-2000 and Dunn 1994 discuss specific instances of Euripidean cult invention and the relevant historical comparanda.

¹⁶ Scullion 1999-2000, 218; Tzanetou 1999-2000, 200; Segal 1999-2000, 289; see also Sourvinou-Inwood 1997 on "exploratory constructs," 175.

restoration of order.¹⁷ The freedom with which Euripides changes and creates religious practice seems to be an invitation to interpretation, a deliberately created element of his fictional world in which he has the freedom to communicate religious and dramatic meaning.

To generalize, scholarship on religion in Euripides has focused primarily on the gods - whether Euripides himself believed in them, their nature, and their conception of justice. When mortals are considered in a religious context the focus is on their ritual practices relative to historical rites, or their response to the world and justice imposed on them by divine figures. What I propose is a new perspective on Euripidean religion that integrates the divine and mortal spheres. I argue that Euripides presents them as two parts of the same religious landscape, both subject to the same rules of religious status and practice; and that although there is a divide between divinity and mortality, their shared religious rules allow for some fluidity in this boundary.¹⁸ Euripides highlights the liminality of certain characters and has them mediate between gods and humans. Sometimes these intermediate figures mitigate the disastrous results of the distance between the two, and other times they bring further ruin. Although I am reading religion in Euripides as a set of practices created for a fictional world, it is firmly rooted in the religion of the poet's time and place.¹⁹ For this reason I build my interpretation on recent scholarship which understands Greek religion as a loosely connected network of interrelated

¹⁷ Knox 1991, 223; Basta Donzelli 1987, 34-35; Lesky 1972, 391

¹⁸ Burkert observes that some "societies of gods" like maenads and satyrs mirror human cult associations (1985, 173). I wish to expand on this view to develop an understanding of how all gods participate in religious practice and are subject to the rituals and rules of religion.

¹⁹ This perspective is based on Lowe's definition of plot, which is the way a story is shaped by "the structure of a gamelike narrative universe" in which characters and events must follow certain rules (Lowe 2000, 33, 36-60).

groups, statuses, and actions. The fluidity of characters and groups in Euripides reflects this system's flexibility.

Theoretical Approaches to Greek Religion

The prevalent system of understanding Greek religion in recent scholarship has been the polis model, as described by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood. In this view, all mortal-divine interactions are organized within the institution of the polis. Sourvinou-Inwood specifies that even private cult acts are subject to the polis' structuring force. Likewise, even on the panhellenic level she sees the polis as Greek religion's basic framework.²⁰ There is a great deal to like about this model. Political and religious life in Greece were certainly intertwined, with temples and cults, priesthoods and festivals closely linked with the polis as governing and social body; political actions were full of religious ritual and dependent on divine favor. To understand Greek religion separate from the Greek polis would be to misunderstand it. Yet the polis model also limits our understanding of Greek religion by restricting it within the structure of the polis.

Three major objections have been made to the idea of the polis as the structure of Greek religion. First is that the model is based on our understanding of Athens in particular, in both religious and political matters, due to the imbalance of our evidence.²¹ Similarly, it favors the structure of the polis at the expense of other socio-political structures at work in Greek culture, like *ethne* (Eidinow 2011, 14). The tendency to take Athens as a model for all Greece is far from

²⁰ Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a, 19 and 2000b, 51. See also Price 1999, 7; Burkert 1985, 276; and Yunis 1988, 19-28 for a similar view.

²¹ Eidinow 2011, 14; Price 1999, 9

restricted to the study of Greek religion. But with our generally Atheno-centric understanding of Greek political life, a model of Greek religion structured by the polis will easily become an understanding of Athenian religion. Sourvinou-Inwood demonstrates this narrowed focus in her discussion of the Taurian cult of Artemis in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, which she describes as “zoomed” toward and away from the Athenian cult of Artemis (1997, 172). The tragedy is of course aimed at an Athenian audience, but the heroes are not Athenian, and a broader view of Artemis throughout Greece could better reflect the audience's knowledge.

The second criticism is that the model conceives of a one-sided relationship between polis and religion, when the interaction was in reality more mutual. As much as Greek religion was “embedded” in the structures of the polis, as Kindt puts it, the polis was just as “embedded” in religion (2012, 16-19). As Burkert notes, in more extreme iterations of this model the imbalance can lead to the mistaken implication that the polis actually controlled religion (1995, 202). Religious identity becomes dependent on polis membership in this model, and religious activity is understood as meaningful not in terms of religious goals, but only in terms of political gain and power.²² In other words, an understanding of religion as imposed by the polis can quickly lose sight of the inherent functions and values of religion.

Finally, Kindt and Eidinow both argue that the polis model by definition excludes any number of religious practices that do not conform to the structure of the polis (2012, 18; 2011, 14). Although Sourvinou-Inwood claims that even private religious actions are subsumed by the structure of the polis, she is focusing on private acts within the context of public cults. But many other religious acts are at best tenuously tied to the polis at large: curses and magic spells, private

²² Eidinow, Burkert, and Price all warn against this tendency (2011, 14; 1985, 257-58; 1999, 86).

oracular consultations, and other largely unstructured individual activities, are all marginalized by the definition of religion as a polis matter (Kindt 2012, 23). Kindt criticizes the model as begging the question: practices that do not fit the model are written off as ‘not really religion.’²³ The biases of modern Western religious thought, defined by group practices and top-down organization and largely opposed to magical practices, may also be to blame. Though marginalized practices such as magic do not fit closely with more organized cult practices, festivals, and other public religion, Kindt argues that any model of Greek religion must accommodate both. The result is a more loosely defined collection of roles and actions, what Kindt calls “thin coherence” as opposed to the “thick coherence” of the more structured polis model (2012, 23). This approach works well with the more dynamic understanding of the relationship between different groups and individuals as proposed in Eidinow’s “network” model (2011, 14).

In an effort to develop a more complex and dynamic understanding of Greek religion, Eidinow turns to the recent field of social network theory.²⁴ The basic units of this model are nodes, individuals and groups with their own identities; and ties, relationships between two or more nodes. A map of the nodes and ties within any society or system creates a web representing the complex interrelationships that reflect and affect social behavior (2011, 11-12). It is important to stress that the network is not merely descriptive, something created by social interactions, but also proscriptive, a reality that creates meaning and affects interactions

²³ Noted in Kindt 2012, 18 and Price 1999, 102. For an example of this see Burkert 1985, 55.

²⁴ In particular she refers to White 2008 as the basis for her model.

regardless of whether it is mapped out or thought of as a network.²⁵ The network in essence facilitates a cycle of changes: interactions affect the shape of the network, which in turn affects future interactions. Thus the network is in a constant state of flux (2011, 18). It is not only the ties within the network implicated in this ongoing change; the nodes, too, can change and effect change, as an individual's or group's identity drives its interactions and can change as a result of its own and others' actions and relationships.²⁶

Kindt's criticisms of the polis model are similar to Eidinow's, and her response likewise draws on a sociological model, Ober's "thin coherence," to describe Greek religion (Ober 2005, 69-91). This model de-emphasizes the connections of a single cultural institution - the polis, in this instance - to allow for change and contestation, and to better understand connections apart from the institution.²⁷ Thin coherence is easily compatible with network theory: polis religion filters the religious network through the structured network of the polis, resulting in a sometimes distorted picture that highlights certain nodes and ties while burying others. By lessening the focus on this institution, a fuller view of the whole network emerges, less structured and cohesive - hence "thin coherence." This model is not opposed to order or the polis structure, but it seeks to expand our view and see elements that complement or challenge the order in addition to those that reinforce it (Kindt 2012, 190).

While the details and theory of Eidinow's and Kindt's approaches are distinct from one another, their relevance to the study of tragic religion is the same. Tragedy is a relational and

²⁵ Eidinow 2011, 12. The term used to describe the creation of meaning by the network is "cognitive network."

²⁶ Eidinow 2011, 15-16. For a detailed example of this see her discussion on curse tablets, 24-25

²⁷ Kindt 2012, 22. Burkert notes that the lack of coherence in Greek cults led to interrelationships and participations across the various cults (1987, 46-52).

dynamic genre, and one in which changes in status play a pivotal role. Both new models attempt to accommodate change, complexity, and in-betweens. It is my hope that drawing on these models will enable a nuanced understanding of tragedy's religious elements. I would like to devote my study to religion for its own sake, not as a set of cultural practices alone (as in Mikalson) or as a political tool (as the polis model can view it) or dramatic device (as in some interpretations).²⁸ Tragedy is an ideal area for the exploration of these religious perspectives as it addresses the individual and the political, the institutional and the relational, the structured and the marginalized, yet it does not restrict these things to binaries.²⁹ Additionally, Eidinow expresses the need for this model to be applied to a study of divine-mortal relationships (2011, 34). My study aims to illuminate these relationships in particular and to demonstrate how they, too, function as a dynamic and changeable system.

Practice and Status: A New Model of Euripidean Religion

To better understand the way Euripides' religious system functions, I propose to define Greek religion in terms of two categories. Eidinow does the same in her network model comprised of nodes and ties, individuals or groups and their relationships to one another. To apply this system to religion more specifically I wish to amend this to 'practice' and 'status,' each applied in religious terms. Status is roughly equivalent to the nodes of the network model,

²⁸ Price argues that traditional Greek religion was one facet among many defining social identity (1999, 141). While the contrast to the all-encompassing identity of later religious movements (Christianity and the cults of Isis and Mithras, for example) is significant, Kindt and Eidinow both present models that highlight the importance of religious identity for its own sake within the Greek religious system. As I apply this line of thinking to Euripides' telling of myths, I will demonstrate that religious identity was central to his characters, not merely one factor among many.

²⁹ Kindt warns against binaries in the interpretation of Greek religion (2012, 193).

being a person's identity within a religious context; but it also includes the pre-existing relationship ties that help define the person.³⁰ Status may include such roles as 'cult member' or 'priestess,' relationships like 'suppliant,' 'giver of divine commands,' or 'son of a god,' and the broad identities of 'divine' and 'mortal.' An individual may hold many different attributes of status simultaneously, and some are temporary or situational. So, for example, a priest of Apollo could at the same time be a suppliant of Zeus; when his prayer is completed and Zeus has responded, the second status no longer applies. However, a positive response to his prayer would institute a new status of indebtedness to Zeus. Even his status as priest is relevant only in certain situations.³¹ Practice, broadly speaking, is any religious action that an individual takes. Sacrifice and cult practice are classic examples of religious practice; prayer and conversation with a god are also practice, as are magical incantations and curse tablets.³² Most nebulous to define is religious belief, the expressions of which I also consider practice.³³

I have given examples of what statuses and actions I consider 'religious,' but what exactly is religion, or what makes something religious? In essence it is interaction with the divine

³⁰ While *nodes* represent both individuals and groups, my study focuses mostly on individuals and I will refer only to individuals from this point on, except when specifically discussing a group, with the understanding that the discussion applies equally well to groups.

³¹ Price and Burkert note that priests' status is limited to particular ritual contexts (1999, 68; 1985, 95).

³² Mikalson highlights Euripides' particular focus on religious practices including cult aetiologies, local particularism in worship of the gods, descriptions of rituals, references to 'daimon' and 'theos,' and emphasis on punishment for sin and reward for piety (1991, 229).

³³ While it is generally understood that Greek religion is a religion of practice, not of belief, there are many examples of individuals expressing their beliefs about the gods. Kindt suggests that we not separate belief from practice (2012, 31). But belief itself is difficult to assess and not emphasized in Greek literature. I will limit myself to direct expressions of belief (or disbelief) which, like prayers, can be understood as verbal actions related to the gods.

and immortal.³⁴ All individuals have religious status and take religious action, but not every status or act is religious. So ‘beloved’ is not an inherently religious status, but ‘beloved of a god’ is religious by virtue of the divine relationship. Writing is not always a religious action, but inscribing a curse tablet is religious as it involves supernatural forces. This definition is not limited to human interactions with the divine. Gods are participants in the Greek religious system, and they hold religious statuses and take religious actions much as mortals do - more so, in fact, as their entire existence involves the divine. Viewing the relationships and actions of the gods in the same terms and system as the relationships and actions of mortals may help shed light on the ‘theological problem,’ as Knox puts it, of gods pitted against one another (1991, 225). The hierarchy of gods, the extent and limitations of their power, are not a separate element of religion but one and the same as the religious system that guides mortal worship.³⁵ Religious thought at Euripides’ time included the idea that gods are dependent on mortals’ service (Wildberg 1999-2000, 239). This concept supports the view that gods are participants in the religious system.

As with the *nodes* and *ties* of Eidinow’s religious network, practice and status affect one another and create a dynamic system which allows for change. An individual’s status determines the practices they take: a priest can perform certain rituals or a god can exert power over mortals

³⁴ Sacrifice and ritual have long been identified as a means of contact and communication between mortal and divine. See Price 1999, 37-39; Burkert 1985, 201-202; Foley 1985, 63. I expand this to apply to religion more broadly.

³⁵ Lloyd-Jones 1956 and Allan 2006, for example, discuss the power structure of the Olympians and the limitations on even Zeus’ power in epic and tragedy but not in terms of an integrated divine-mortal system. In fact, Lloyd-Jones sees mortal and divine justice as parallel but separate.

because of his priesthood.³⁶ And practices can change or create status: a sacrifice strengthens a mortal's relationship with a god, or divine favor creates a debt owed by the one favored. Scholars have already identified some ways in which this functions in Greek religion, particularly in divine-mortal relationships in the form of reciprocity. Gould discusses prayer as a means for mortals to put their relationship with the gods in reciprocal terms (1985, 14-15). Similarly, Wildberg demonstrates that piety (on the part of mortals) and epiphany (on the part of gods) form a system of reciprocity that can elevate the status of mortals and bridge the gap between human and divine. He also notes that a mortal's character and beliefs about the gods affect his or her interactions with divine figures.³⁷

The greatest divide in Greek religious status is that between mortal and divine. It is a nearly uncrossable gap that drives a great deal of the interactions between humans and gods. But like the rest of the practice/status system, it is not totally fixed. A mortal can be closer to or farther from the divine, and likewise a god can be closer to or farther from mortals. And in special cases, an individual is able to move between the mortal and divine spheres, whether temporarily or permanently. Euripides uses figures who transgress these boundaries to varying extents to explore mortality/divinity not as a binary, but rather as a spectrum of religious status along which individuals may move.³⁸ Within the divine and mortal worlds separately there are

³⁶ Eidinow describes this process as identities underpinning the interactions within a network (2011, 15-16).

³⁷ Wildberg 1999-2000, 235 and 255. Similarly, Hall notes that a mortal's status (such as sex, age, and work) determines the way they relate to the gods (2010, 158).

³⁸ Vernant recognizes the spectrum of status among mortals with divinity at the top step, but does not explore divine status along a spectrum as well (1991, 35-39).

easily recognized hierarchies.³⁹ But interactions between gods and mortals show that the Greeks do not conceive of these power structures as completely separate. In the middle, at the high end of mortality and the low end of divinity, there is overlap. The ambiguity is present in the language itself, which at times equivocates heroes and demigods. The technical difference in their mortal/divine status is secondary to their actions and function.⁴⁰ Labarbe argues that Homeric heroes are elevated to such an extent by their divine lineage that they can criticize the gods with impunity (1980, 138-48). Such intermediacy between mortal and divine is present simply in the hierarchy of predetermined roles. But as Greek religion is a dynamic system in which status can be altered, religious practice has the ability to further blur the boundaries and give certain figures flexibility between the mortal and the divine spheres.

The figure that immediately comes to mind as an intermediate between mortal and immortal, of course, is Heracles. As the mortal son of a god who is finally granted immortality and even named as an Olympian at times, he transcends the mortal/divine boundary more fully than any other. His ambiguity makes him a fascinating study on the mortal/divine spectrum, one whom I will examine closely in my discussion of Euripides. But he is far from the only mortal to approach divinity. Aesclepius and the Dioscouroi are similarly considered gods despite their mortal ancestry, and Dionysus' divinity is even more firmly established.⁴¹ And even among mortals who are not considered gods, there are many who acquire some aspects of divinity,

³⁹ See Allan on the parallel hierarchy and power structure of gods and men in Homer (2006, 8-10) and Basta Donzelli on the inequality of both worlds in Euripides, contrary to the late-5th century theory of equality among all humans (1987, 37-42).

⁴⁰ Mikalson suggests "function" and "atmosphere" of hero-cults in tragedy as points of distinction between honorary heroes and those treated as divinities (1991, 33-35).

⁴¹ Burkert 1985, 205-208 and Mikalson 1991, 33

whether temporarily or permanently.⁴² As Heracles is aided in his ascent by his status as Zeus' son, each intermediate figure has some special status that facilitates their movement beyond ordinary mortality. Typically this is some sort of relationship with a god, but these take many forms: special devotion, patronage, a role as priest(ess), or service to a divine mandate, as well as divine lineage, can all help to elevate a mortal. And this status is not enough on its own, but the mortal must take religious action that builds on their status, and in doing so grasp some measure of divinity. The process is circular, as status informs action and is then affected by that action; but it is not static. A priest's ritual acts in the role of priest, for example, not only reaffirm his status as priest but also draw him closer to the divine world. Unlike Heracles, some mediating figures do not undergo a permanent change in their mortal/divine status. But even these temporary elevations can mediate between the mortal and divine and contribute to our understanding of mortality/divinity as a spectrum.

As I have already stated, I consider the gods to be participants in the status-practice system of Greek religion. As such, they are also able to move along the spectrum of divinity, both within the hierarchy of gods and between the divine and mortal worlds. For the most part, this occurs by gods diminishing the full force of divinity when they appear to mortals. The distinction between god and human is maintained but the physical distance and the overbearing power of the god is lessened.⁴³ Often it is the lesser divinities - those for whom the distinction

⁴² Mikalson notes for example that Alcestis is momentarily considered divine (1991, 35).

⁴³ Vernant sees it as a paradox: gods must either dim or disguise themselves to appear to humans, or relinquish their superiority by appearing openly in the presence of mortals. The very act of epiphany is a diminishment of divine status (1991, 44-45). Mastrorade notes that in tragedy, the crane preserves some of the physical separation between god and mortal; but in many instances gods appear at stage-level, usually in disguise or as another god's subordinate (1990, 273).

between divine and mortal is already blurred - who most effectively take an intermediate position. In more extreme cases even Olympian gods may disguise themselves as mortals, sometimes for long periods of time, and become immersed in the world of mortals. As with most instances of mortals taking on aspects of divinity, the change is typically temporary. But at least in the short term, we see that even the gods' divine status is flexible. And finally, even brief divine ventures into the mortal world can lead to further blurring of mortal/divine boundaries, especially in the form of half-divine offspring who are themselves in a position to move between mortality and divinity.

I must be very clear that my discussion does not intend to make value judgements on any religious role or action within Euripides' tragedies. Rather, it attempts to lay out how religion functions within the plays, in a general sense as described in this introduction and in specific cases as detailed in the following chapters. It will become clear through the individual studies that movement between mortal and divine spheres is neither all good nor all bad, that it can lead both to happy resolution and to utter disaster, and that it is more successful or effective in some cases than in others. The themes and tone of the tragedies likewise varies, but the religious mechanism remains consistent, and understanding this mechanism aids in our understanding and interpretation of each one.

Case Studies

Thus far I have addressed the issues of religion, mortality, and divinity in very general terms. In the following chapters I will show how these concepts play out in Euripidean tragedy. To illustrate in specific details I have chose four in-depth case studies of individual tragedies. The nature of a dynamic network system is best illustrated in a focused study that allows for the

examination of far-reaching effects and interactions between different actions and statuses through the entirety of a play. In her study of Sophocles Brook argues that a play's entire ritual context must be taken into account to properly understand the individual rituals within it (2018, 3-20). Much the same, an entire play's religious network must be considered to see the effect of the status and actions at play in any given moment. Moreover, examining the entirety of a tragedy's religious framework demonstrates the importance that ritual and status hold for every tragic character and the ways in which Euripides uses them to shape his plots and develop themes.

This study considers in detail four tragedies: *Alcestis*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Heracles*, and *Bacchae*. These plays present characters in a wide variety of religious roles and equally varied ritual responses to their situations. They feature especially clear examples of gods and mortals crossing the boundaries that separate them, using religious actions to change their status or circumstances, and interacting with one another in ritual contexts. They also all portray gods appearing and intervening in seemingly unusual and unexpected ways and mortals trying to engage with gods or provide resolution that the gods do not. All these elements of the selected plays vividly illustrate the structure and flexibility of the Euripidean religious framework. While the specific circumstances of the tragedies vary widely, I will show that the same general religious principles are at play throughout; there is one Euripidean tragic world, and one set of rules. The principles of religious status and practice affecting each other in an endless cycle, and the spectrum of mortality and divinity as a changeable element of an individual's religious status, underpin the behavior of both divine and human characters as they interact in a heavily religious world.

Chapter 2: Wrestling Death: Mortality and Immortality in *Alcestis*

At first glance, *Alcestis* may seem to be a strange choice for a discussion on religion and the gods. Greenwood calls this earliest extant play of Euripides one of only human interest, lacking divine intervention (1953, 12). Indeed, gods appear only in the prologue (Apollo and Thanatos), and the body of the tragedy deals with the reaction of mortals to death. But life and death, and the reversal or avoidance of death as a divine right and power, are central not only to *Alcestis* but also to the nature of human existence and relationships between mortals and gods. Though the gods appear little, the human drama is filled with religious speech and action. Alcestis prepares her own funeral rites; the chorus wishes for divine help to save her from death; Admetus and the chorus promise ritual honors for his dying wife. And Apollo, Alcestis, and Heracles all explore intermediate spaces between life and death, mortality and divinity. The entire play hangs in between life and death as Euripides blurs, equates, and reverses these diametric opposites.⁴⁴

The appearances of Apollo and Heracles, one as a god disguised as a mortal and the other a mortal who will become divine, offer two contrasting examples of responses to death and working against it with beyond-mortal power. Because of structural and verbal parallels between the two halves of the play, Castellani reads Heracles' entrance as a "second prologue" parallel to Apollo's (1979, 490-96). His intervention at the play's end resolves the ongoing crisis resulting from Apollo's initial intervention, as the god himself notes just before his exit (65-69). Though the god and the hero are recognized as parallel, the significance of Apollo's divinity versus

⁴⁴ Equating or reversing opposites is a typical element of Euripidean tragedy. Other examples include slave/free, inside/outside, and male/female (Luschnig 1995, 5).

Heracles' mortality has not been sufficiently explored. Apollo and Heracles act as doubles, one divine and one mortal, at the bookends of the play. In these two the relationship between status and action will be most clear, as their roles affect how they approach the problem of death and their interventions change who they and others are and will be. Apollo has great power and the ability to interact with other gods on behalf of Admetus. But although he is disguised as a mortal he is too far removed from the mortal world to effectively assist with the ongoing crisis in his friend's household. Heracles, by contrast, has more moderate abilities but achieves a more complete resolution to the problem of Alcestis' death.

Critical Considerations: Content and Genre, Psychology and Divinity

Two sets of issues – the nature of the play, and the extent of divine involvement – complicate interpretations of *Alcestis*. Regarding the first point, the story is an unusual choice for tragedy. It belongs to the world of folktale as much as that of myth, and the family at its center has a relatively minor place in the myth cycles typically represented in tragedy.⁴⁵ Closely related is the question of genre; *Alcestis* is often regarded as something other than tragedy due to its subject, tone, and performance position. It is critical before beginning any interpretation to consider these differences carefully, first because any issues of dramatic convention must be balanced with an awareness of if and how the play as a whole is unconventional; and second because existing interpretations of the play may be affected, intentionally or otherwise, by a

⁴⁵ Eumelus, the son of Admetus and Alcestis, receives several mentions in the *Iliad*: 2.711-15, 763; 9.375-97, 558-68; 23.288-376. Admetus is an Argonaut and participated in the Caledonian boar hunt, but this is known only from later sources. The very geography of the family's kingdom, Pherae, marginalizes them further (Thorburn 2002, xxii).

critic's position on the questions of content and genre. As for the second issue, the absence of divinity in *Alcestis*, the focus on mortal responses to Alcestis' death leads to a largely psychological approach to interpretation. The major theme of 20th-century scholarship was the virtue – or lack thereof – Admetus demonstrates throughout. As a result interpretation becomes a search for a moral message in the play, and can gloss over the ambiguities and contradictions that Euripides frequently plays with. Finally, it is necessary to question the extent to which we can see the gods and religion as being removed from the play. A major part of the claim that the gods are absent is the assumption that Apollo's appearance in the prologue is a mere convention, a tool to introduce the plot with little interpretive value. A discussion of the typical elements of divine appearances onstage will aid our understanding of Apollo's role. This prologue stands apart from the other divine prologues we have in extant Euripides and contains parallels to the *deus ex machina* as seen in many of Euripides' epilogues. The formal details of Apollo's portrayal affect the way we understand his involvement in human events, and his relationship to others, both human and divine. Additionally, Heracles appears as a semi-divine intermediary in the play's second half and provides resolution to the family of Admetus through his combination of mortal and divine abilities. His status relative to the gods and his ability to successfully intervene against the god of death contrast the fully-divine Apollo's role in mortal disguise and his intervention that leaves the house of Admetus in continuing crisis.

The story of *Alcestis*, as Euripides tells it, is as follows: Zeus kills Asclepius for bringing dead mortals back to life; his father Apollo kills Zeus' sons the Cyclopes in revenge. As punishment, Zeus sends Apollo to work as a laborer in the house of the mortal Admetus. Apollo rewards the virtue of Admetus, who is fated to die soon, by tricking the Fates into allowing another to take his place. Of all Admetus' loved ones, only his wife Alcestis agrees to die for

him. Admetus swears to her as she is dying that he will never take another wife and will keep his household in perpetual mourning without revelry or song. But Heracles appears just after her death, seeking hospitality on his way to complete one of his Labors. Unwilling to neglect his duties as host, Admetus lies and tells Heracles that it was only a foreigner woman who died; he gives Heracles a closed-off hall of the house for feasting. Heracles, learning the truth, rescues Alcestis from the clutches of Thanatos and restores her to Admetus as a reward for his hospitality. He hides her identity, compelling Admetus to take a strange woman by the hand against his oath to Alcestis, before revealing the happy truth.

Details of this tale prior to Euripides' version are scarce. Admetus' hospitality to Apollo receives brief mention in a lost work of Hesiod, but seemingly without reference to his reward or the ensuing death and rescue of Alcestis.⁴⁶ Sophocles is said to have written a satyr *Admetus*, and Phormus a comedy of the same name, both thought to focus on Apollo's servitude and rescue of Admetus rather than the death and return of Alcestis. Praxilla refers to Admetus in a drinking-song, again without mention of Alcestis.⁴⁷ Likely most relevant is Phrynichus' *Alcestis*, of which we have a few references and one line.⁴⁸ Its genre is unknown, as are the details of its plot. The

⁴⁶ The passage of Hesiod is known by a reference in the *Alcestis* scholia (Parker 2007, xv). The details given show some thematic parallels to Heracles' role in the Euripidean version, but the specifics of the tale are mostly irrelevant to the plot of *Alcestis* (Conacher 1968, 16)

⁴⁷ Plutarch quotes the Sophoclean *Admetus* (*De Def. Orac.* 417e-f), which is taken to be a satyr by the hard labor for Apollo referenced in the line. The *Admetus* of Phormus, an early 5th-century Syracusean comic poet, is listed in the Suda and no details are known. Praxilla's mid-5th century reference to Admetus, quoted in Aristoph. *Wasps* 1238, exhorts listeners to follow his example in making friends of noble character. There is no reference to the events involving Apollo or Alcestis (Parker 2007, xv-xii).

⁴⁸ Late 6th or early 5th century. Aesch. *Supp* 214 and *Eum.* 723-28 are taken as allusions to Phrynichus regarding Apollo's servitude to Admetus and his trick against the Fates, respectively. In a comment on *Aen.* 4.694 Servius asserts that Euripides copied from Phrynichus the image of Thanatos cutting a lock of Alcestis' hair with his sword (Parker 2007, xv-xvi).

line, quoted in Hesychius, is commonly believed to refer to Heracles wrestling Thanatos, but without much textual support.⁴⁹ In sum, it remains unclear what version(s) of the story existed or with how much variation, much less what story Euripides was familiar with or inspired by.⁵⁰ More certain is that following Euripides, authors retell or invent a number of alternate versions. According to Plato, the gods send Alcestis back (*Symp.* 179b-d); in Apollodorus, centuries later, either Persephone returns her or Heracles saves her (1.9). Apollodorus also gives an otherwise-unattested explanation for Admetus' impending death: he angered Artemis by neglecting her sacrifices before his wedding. Three comic poets are also believed to have told versions of the story in the early 4th century; no details of these comedies' plots are known.⁵¹ From these limited surviving references, we can reasonably say that the Alcestis myth was generally considered suitable for lighter genres, and open to significant variation in detail (Parker 2007, xvii).

Several early-20th century scholars turned to comparative folklore to better understand this story.⁵² The tale of a woman dying in place of her husband appears in numerous Indo-European cultures; Wilamowitz identifies it as a primeval death and regeneration myth.⁵³

⁴⁹ "But he mastered the fearless body with its struggling limbs" (σῶμα δ' ἀθαμβῆς γυιοδόνητον τείρει, Latte I, p. 55). The wrestling Heracles is a natural attribution, but still speculative; it could, for example, refer to Apollo overpowering the Fates in a slightly changed version of events. The addition of Heracles to the story, then, is still in doubt. Conacher concludes that it simply cannot be determined (1968, 17).

⁵⁰ Dale emphasizes that this uncertainty applies both to Euripides as author drawing from previous stories, and to the audience reacting to his particular version of the tale; they may not have had a set idea of a 'canonical' version beforehand, and if they did we do not know what it was (1954, ix-xii).

⁵¹ *Alcestis* by Antiphanes and *Admetus* by Aristomenes and Theopompus (Parker 2007, xviii).

⁵² Notable contributions include: Hesselung D. C. 1914. "Alkestis en de Volkspoezie." *VMAW* 12, 1-32; Lesky, A. 1925. *Alkestis, Der Mythos und das Drama*. Vienna; Megas, G. 1933. "Die Sage von Alkestis." *Archiv fur Religionswiss.* 30, 1-33.

⁵³ First discussed in *Isyllos von Epidauros* (Berlin, 1886), 71-3 (Parker 2007, i)

Typically, such stories feature the new bride making her sacrifice on her wedding night. The thematic focus is on preserving dynastic lines, and the bride is rewarded for her virtue by being restored to life. Only in a few versions is there a physical altercation with a death figure, and typically the groom himself is the combatant. Euripides is the only known one (with the possible exception of Phrynicus) to introduce a third party to perform the rescue. In doing so, he makes Alcestis' restoration a reward for Admetus' virtue, rather than her own.⁵⁴ Thematically, Euripides offers a new story substantially different from the other folktales, focused heavily on the experience of death and loss. And although divine action is relegated to the margins of the play, the gods – and Heracles, not yet a god but more than human – play an integral part unattested in the parallel folktales.⁵⁵ In comparison both to parallel folktales in other cultures, and to the prior versions of Alcestis' story in Greek literature, it is clear that Euripides takes a darker approach to the tale. The happy ending remains, but the prominence of death and mourning, the role of Heracles (unusual, whether or not it is original), and the tragic tone of the play invite careful interpretation.

The light nature and heavy themes of this tale factor into a major point of contention in interpreting *Alcestis*: what is its genre? Excepting Phrynicus' play, which is of unknown genre, all other known dramas on the family story are satyrs or comedies. Euripides' *Alcestis* is from earlier in his career than the rest of his extant plays (438 BCE), so comparison to his other works is not necessarily illuminating. And there is limited information about the Greek understanding

⁵⁴ Parker 2007, xii-iii. Conacher notes that *Alcestis* is not the only play of Euripides in which rescue comes from an unexpected source. *Medea*, *Heracles*, and *Andromache* all feature similar surprises (1968, 18-20).

⁵⁵ Lesky reads the introduction of divine involvement as a doubling of the plot, a myth-plot in which the gods save Admetus and a folk-plot in which Heracles saves Alcestis (Conacher 1968, 18).

of the dramatic genres and their boundaries or overlap during this time period.⁵⁶ As we know that it was performed in fourth position, scholars have long tried to understand it relative to the satyr typically associated with that placement. Its happy ending likewise leads some to question whether it can be classified as a tragedy, based on a restrictive understanding of genre. The uncertainty this issue generates has led to a wide range of interpretations (Dale 1954, xviii). Arguments of genre are largely speculative, because we lack enough information about satyr-plays in general and whether the fourth position was reserved for satyrs alone at that time. As Mastronarde notes, so few of the tragedies created and performed in 5th-century Athens survive that scholars can only speculate about how innovative a particular author or tragedy would have been (2010, 52). It is possible that only *Alcestis* ever appeared as a non-satyr fourth play, or conversely that tragedies frequently occupied that place (Parker 2007, xx). No ancient commentators make note of the play's genre or indicate that its position was out of the ordinary (Dale 1954, xix). A popular response among modern critics has been to label it 'prosatyric', a term that applies to no other work but *Alcestis*, and to identify both satyric and tragic elements in the play. Dale calls it a satyric theme treated in a tragic style; Greenwood, a tragedy framed by a satyric prologue and epilogue (1954, xx-xxi; 1953, 12). Critics point to the 'ogreish' portrayal of Thanatos and the drunkenness of Heracles as satyric.⁵⁷ But the defining feature of the genre, the actual chorus of satyrs, is absent (Parker 2007, xxi). It is possible that genres were less clearly defined at this relatively early point in Greek drama. The fourth position may not have been

⁵⁶ Parker cautions against thinking of genre as restrictive, characterizing 5th-century tragedy as a form in development and the great tragedians as experimenters (2007, xxi). For a more thorough discussion of the problem of genre in Euripides, and the variable and innovative nature of 5th-century tragedy, see Mastronarde 1999-2000; pp. 34-36 especially address the particular issues of satyr and tragicomedy.

⁵⁷ See for example Dale 1954, xx-xxi; Barnes 1968, 28; Mastronarde 1999-2000, 35.

distinctive, and the “borrowing” of characters and moods from satyr might not have been enough to overpower the whole structure and tone of the play, which are unequivocally tragic (Mastronarde 2010, 57). Similarly, the suggestion that it is half tragedy and half comedy because of structural parallels between the two halves of the play and because of the happy ending, can be dismissed.⁵⁸ The play’s structural parallels merit discussion, but Greek tragedy does not require what modern readers think of as a ‘tragic’ ending, and there is no compelling reason to label *Alcestis* as a ‘tragicomedy’ or ‘double plot’ when such generic terms were not recognized by the Greeks.⁵⁹ Whether or not it was unusual or surprising to his audience, Euripides clearly wrote *Alcestis* as a tragedy.⁶⁰

It is clear that Euripides’ *Alcestis* defies easy classification. In part this is due to how little is certain about convention at the time, and about Euripides’ early works. From what is known, however, it seems clear that the play is unusual by design, and it is reasonable to think that even with a wealth of comparative information it might still be baffling. The typically lighthearted story adopts the form and tone of tragedy, with results that must be drastically different from the *Admetus* and *Alcestis* plays that came before. Whether he followed an innovation of Phrynicus or introduced a tragedy where only comedy and satyr had been written before, Euripides presents a work that mixes light and heavy themes, tragic and satyric elements. Though it is not a satisfying or tidy answer, it is necessary to accept *Alcestis* as a tragedy with possible influences from the

⁵⁸ For an argument in favor of the ‘tragicomic’ classification see Kitto 1961.

⁵⁹ For discussion of the parallel structure see Barnes 1968, 28; Castellani 1979, 488; *contra* Dale, who argues that the second prologue may be unusual, but is in no way marked (1954, 108). There are a number of parallels in language, structure, and theme between the two halves of the play; these will be discussed below.

⁶⁰ Buxton suggests speculatively that it was a surprise (1987, 217).

other dramatic genres, an experiment in a genre without rigid rules. Rather than pushing to fit the play into a special classification in an attempt to explain its plot and performance position, we must note its influences and allow it to remain undefined, looking to the text to speak for itself without a more precise label.

Readers of *Alcestis* in the twentieth century, beginning with Wilamowitz, focus in large part on psychological interpretations of the play. In particular, they debate the motivations and virtue of the main characters, especially Admetus, as if they were real people. The recurring question is whether Admetus is to be admired or condemned: did he prove himself noble in his treatment of guests and earn his reward, or was he cowardly and selfish to allow his wife to die in his place? Such interpretations typically place heavy emphasis on the *agon* between Pheres and Admetus, reading it as a key to a correct moral understanding of the play. Based on their conclusions regarding Admetus' character, scholars must then try to explain the eventual rescue of Alcestis by Heracles. If they condemn Admetus, the ending may be ironic or intentionally unrealistic; or Admetus' acceptance of the woman is a betrayal of his oath to Alcestis. If they find him virtuous, it is a reward for his good hospitality.⁶¹ Conclusions vary, but the approach consistently focuses on one character at the expense of other elements in the play. At times, the discussion can devolve into 'decoding' a meaning in the plot and passing moral judgment on the actions and words of the characters. Dale criticizes this psychological style of criticism in which, she says, a character-study is often built up from numerous small comments piled together without context. (1954, xxiii-xxv).

⁶¹ Conacher, for example, argues that Euripides introduces Heracles in order to keep the focus on Admetus' character (1968, 20).

The focus on Admetus' character in particular leads to a thematic interpretation of *Alcestis* as a dramatization of the tension between *philia* and *xenia* as measures of Admetus' virtue. The reward for his *xenia* to Apollo leads him to break his obligations to *philia* by asking his loved ones to die in his place, accepting Alcestis' death and disowning his parents for refusing. He further betrays *philia* toward Alcestis in favor of *xenia* to Heracles, first by hosting the hero during her mourning period, then by accepting the prize-woman despite his oath to her.⁶² Schein and Padilla both link the theme of *philia* and *xenia* with the relationship between mortals and gods. Schein emphasizes that Admetus' *xenia* relationships with divine or quasi-divine figures overshadow his human *philia* relationships. Apollo and Heracles offer escape from death and salvation for his household. But, he argues, these relationships lack the personal support offered by *philia*, which Admetus neglects when he finds it advantageous to do so. (1988, 203-06). Padilla takes a related approach, reading the play as a series of exchanges in a system of *charis*, which includes both *philia* and *xenia*. He argues that excessive acts of *charis*, in particular the introduction of death into the exchange system, disrupt the social balance between gods and mortals.⁶³ To fully understand the social dynamics of *charis*, *xenia* and *philia* in a context involving both divine and mortal characters, however, it is critical to examine the religious context of their interactions as well. The disruption of the balance between divine and mortal characters is made possible by the malleability of religious status even along the divide of mortality. The centrality of death and life throughout *Alcestis* can be more clearly understood

⁶² Goldfarb 1992, Scodel 1979, and Dyson 1988 all make arguments along this line.

⁶³ His argument draws from the work of M. Mauss and E. Durkheim, and also P. Bourdieu, in gift-giving and social dynamics (2000, 180-1). Compare also to Dellner's analysis of exchanges in *Alcestis* (2000).

with an examination of the religious actions taken by both gods and mortals over the course of the play.

Alcestis is not typically considered ripe for theological discussion. The story is folktale with only tenuous links to typical mythology. Apollo appears, but only as a prologue, and the body of the play centers on the very mortal experience of death. Even the play's resolution is brought about by a hero rather than a divine epilogue. Some scholars have approached the play from the perspective of understanding Euripides' view of the gods and their justice. For Verrall, the unrealistic conclusion discredits the gods; for Burnett and Dellner, Alcestis' restoration affirms divine justice.⁶⁴ Some note the disconnect between divine and mortal, as expressed in the dealings with death throughout.⁶⁵ The play as a whole is not typically read with a religious focus. But the circumstances and responses of its characters are replete with religious significance and relationships. Characters take actions which affect their position relative to death and the gods. Their divinity or mortality affects their responses and ability to make change. Alcestis' death, which she expresses in ritual terms, propels her beyond mortality into the role of hero and near-divinity; she is promised cult honors and a place of pride among the gods of the underworld. Admetus' personal relationship with Apollo and Heracles leads to the avoidance and reversal of death, brought about through religiously-expressed encounters with other divinities (the Fates and Thanatos). And finally, the circumstances leading to each of these encounters involve dealings between other gods, and questions of divinity and mortality. At every level, the action-status framework of Euripidean religion is at work.

⁶⁴ Verrall 1895 in Parker 2007, xliii; Burnett 1971 in Knox 1972, 275; Dellner 2000, 12.

⁶⁵ Dellner 2000, 12; Padilla 2000, 186-87; Luschnig 1995, 18-24

The presence of gods onstage in *Alcestis* is relegated to the play's prologue, in a scene that may be easy to dismiss as a mere convention for the sake of plot exposition. However, Euripides shows enough variety in his prologues to make it worthwhile to examine his use of the convention, and to suggest some relevance beyond exposition. First, *Alcestis* is one of only five extant prologues in Euripides that feature a god.⁶⁶ The appearance of a god to begin the play may therefore be slightly marked. Second, Apollo's appearance is stylistically unique among the five. The other prologue gods begin with a formal introduction of themselves, addressing the audience directly. Apollo neglects to introduce himself at all, beyond calling himself a god; his identity is communicated implicitly by his physical attributes and the mention of his son Asclepius (2-3). His first words instead are an address to the House of Admetus. Such an opening line appears in no other divine Euripidean prologues, but parallels several openings spoken by mortals.⁶⁷ This distinction is consistent with the fact that he appears at stage level rather than above it, and that he is emerging from his time exiled as a servant to Admetus.⁶⁸ In speech and staging, then, Apollo is not a typical prologue god. Likewise, his personal involvement in the plot sets him apart.

⁶⁶ The others are *Bacchae*, *Hippolytus*, *Ion*, and *Troades*. Also of note is the prologue spoken by a ghost in *Hecuba*. For a discussion of the dramatic details of these appearances refer to Mastronarde 1990.

⁶⁷ The other four divine prologues introduce themselves by name and titles. Two of the four, Dionysus in *Bacchae* and Poseidon in *Troades*, begin with the word ἦκω, as does the ghost of Polydorus in *Hecuba* (as the ghost of a mortal he is unlike both the divine and the mortal prologues). No extant opening line spoken by a living mortal does so. Aphrodite in *Hippolytus* begins with her titles, and Hermes in *Ion* with his lineage. Three mortal prologues, in contrast, begin by addressing a city or land as Apollo does here: *Andromache*, *Electra*, and *Helen*.

⁶⁸ While the conventional understanding of prologue gods places most or all of them at stage level, Mastronarde argues convincingly for greater use of roof level. However, *Alcestis* and *Ion* are assuredly stage-level prologues based on staging clues in the text. Mastronarde suggests a lessened sense of the division between mortal and divine in these instances, perhaps influenced by the conventions of satyr and comedy (1990, 273-78).

Of the divine prologues in Euripides, only Dionysus in *Bacchae* comes into direct contact with mortals onstage; his involvement and appearance in the body of the play are unique in extant Euripides. At the time of the prologue, however, he has not yet interacted with the play's main characters. He has meddled from a distance by sending madness upon the women of Thebes; similarly, Aphrodite in *Hippolytus* afflicts Phaedra with the lovesickness that drives the plot, and Hermes in *Ion* has interfered by setting the infant Ion on the steps of Apollo's temple. But neither appears to mortals; their role is unknown to the humans involved until the end.⁶⁹ Athena and Poseidon in *Troades* are most removed of all. They neither appear to mortals nor play a role in the plot, but plan the destruction of Greek ships after the tragedy's close. Unlike any of these, Apollo has already interfered, in person, in the fate of Admetus and his house. He serves in mortal disguise as a shepherd, and rewards Admetus' generosity to him by allowing him to escape from death.⁷⁰ The god's direct involvement, appearing personally to Admetus and altering the course of events, stands out from the conventional prologue. Apollo, through his mortal disguise and friendship with Admetus, has entered the world of the play even though he appears only at its margin. By his actions toward both other gods and mortals, he has changed his own role and created an opportunity for others to change theirs as well. Critics typically read the prologue and epilogue as removed from the main action of the play – a separate reality,

⁶⁹ Carrying an infant, unable to remember or communicate, hardly counts as mortal interaction. The baby is carried enclosed in a lidded cradle, which Hermes opens at the very end of his task (*Ion* 39-40), and therefore quite easily considered as an object, rather than a character.

⁷⁰ No details of Apollo's intervention are given, but some things can be reasonably guessed. Since the chorus knows that he appeared as a slave in the household, Apollo must have revealed himself to Admetus. It is likely that he would have offered Admetus his reward at this time.

conventional device, external framework, mediation between the audience and the myth.⁷¹ But Apollo implicates himself in the plot, and references later in the play to him and to his son Asclepius continue the link. His direct involvement in the lives of the mortal protagonists contributes to an understanding of the gods as participants in the religious system, subject to the same basic framework of practice and status that drives mortal religious life.

Apollo's Incomplete Intervention

Apollo's prologue sets him in between divine and mortal worlds. He tells of his interactions in both and speaks of himself as like to and contrasting with his mortal host Admetus. His in-between position has facilitated an enormous feat, the reversal of fate. Both mortal and divine elements of his experience are relevant to his ability to bring about this reward for Admetus, but in the end his divinity is stronger. It limits his ability to relate to his mortal friend and eventually forces a physical separation: he demonstrates a lack of empathy at Admetus' loss of his wife and is constrained by the threat of *miasma* to leave the house as she is about to die. While Apollo's actions have temporarily lowered his status to mortal-like and servile, his divine nature persists, and he defaults to the attitude that honors for gods are paramount and mortals are little more than objects for use. In the end, he will interfere no more and leaves mortals to their own devices.

The backstory Apollo relates begins the themes of escape from death and movement between divine and mortal. These themes will continue throughout the play. The Olympian gods

⁷¹ See for example the attitudes of Verrall 1895, Conacher 1968, Mastronarde 1990, Knox 1991, Mikalson 1991, Dunn 1996, and Lefkowitz 2016.

and their children engage in a power struggle that encompasses politics, personal relationships, and religious rights. The events leading to Apollo's servitude are personal: he takes revenge for his son's death by killing the Cyclopes, who forged the weapon responsible. But for the gods, the personal is also religious. The situation involves multiple transgressions of the boundaries between mortals and gods, and challenges against the power and authority of the gods, especially Zeus. Asclepius has blurred the boundary between mortals and immortals by reversing death, and Zeus kills him as a result. Apollo, by killing the Cyclopes in retaliation, challenges Zeus' authority; in his retelling he emphasizes their role as makers of Zeus' lightning, which is symbolically and materially linked with his power (6-7). As punishment, Apollo crosses the same boundary Asclepius blurs, but in the opposite direction. The change is temporary, but Apollo's actions against Zeus have lowered him to a mortal's level. Padilla calls the change a lowering of social status; Thorburn, a disruption along the vertical axis connecting divine, mortal, and dead.⁷² But while the shift is easily understood in social terms, it is critical to remember that this social system is explicitly religious; in the interactions of gods and men, there can be no social system without religion.

Apollo enters at stage level, physically and visibly lowered from Olympus and from a position of divine authority above the stage. He begins his monologue with an address to the mortal house, and reference to his own time as a servant there. Throughout his opening monologue he defines himself by his relationships to both gods and mortals, presenting himself as one who fits in a mortal context while remaining superior in nature. Twice he notes that he

⁷² Padilla 2000, 187; Thorburn 2002, xxxi. In Thorburn's model the social world of mythology is aligned along two axes, one horizontal – the status of and interactions among mortals – and one vertical – the status of interactions between gods, mortals, and the dead.

was made to serve Admetus, contrasting his divinity with his master's mortality: "I endured dining at the servant's table, despite being a god... and my father compelled me to labor for a mortal man" (ἔτλην ἐγὼ / θῆσαν τράπεζαν αἰνέσθαι θεός περ ὦν... καί με θητεύειν πατήρ / θνητῷ παρ' ἀνδρὶ... ἠνάγκασεν, 1-2, 6-7). He brings out the double contrast, both between his own divinity and Admetus' mortality, and between their natural status and the inverted relationship in which they find themselves. The alliteration of θη/θε and θη/θνη adds emphasis to these contrasts, subtly in 1-2 and more clearly in 6-7. Yet despite these two differences in status, he indicates that he and Admetus are on equal footing by his use of parallel language: "I, being devout, came upon a devout man" (ὀσίου γὰρ ἀνδρὸς ὀσιος ὦν ἐτύγχανον, 10). He suggests their parity not by elevating Admetus but by referring to himself by a mortal attribute, ὀσιος. He continues to portray himself as acting and being on a mortal level with his unusual use of the word.⁷³ The double meaning of τυγχάνω and its placement following ὦν also allows for the listener to hear "I happened to be ὀσιος." This phrasing downplays Apollo's status and emphasizes the sense of parity between him and Admetus. But even this somewhat equal relationship is defined in a religious term, piety. While he communicates a sense of equity, he does so from his own divine perspective; his divinity affects the way in which he perceives his mortal friend.

⁷³ Though Thorburn reads this as praise of Admetus by referring to him with the same term as given to a god (2002, 56), the term is not typically applied to gods. For this reason, and especially in combination with Apollo's punishment and servitude in the house, the language choice indicates a downward shift for the god as much as an upward shift for the man. Parker dismisses the significance of this instance, but gives two parallel uses of ὀσιος, Eur. *Hclid.* 719 and Pindar *Pyth* 9.3, in which speakers imply that the gods have religious responsibilities towards mortals as much as mortals towards gods (2007, 53). Even apart from the major status changes that put Apollo in a position of semi-equality with Admetus, then, ὀσιος applied to a god may carry implications of equitable divine-mortal relationships.

Apollo's temporary position in Admetus' household allows him to have a friendship with him as if between two mortals of equal class. On the same physical level as the man, Apollo expresses concern and sympathy for his friend. Moreover, he attempts on two occasions to alter fate for Admetus' sake, first preventing the man's death and then trying to prevent the death of his wife. His concern is not, as in scenes where a god appears *ex machina*, couched in excuses about fate or the will of Zeus. He takes action against fate, much as mortals often try to do. Nevertheless, he retains his relationships and influence among the gods, and interacts with Admetus from a still-divine perspective. He rewards the man's piety and hospitality by preserving him from death, a disproportionate gift and one beyond the scope of mortal exchange.⁷⁴ He gains this gift by direct interaction with the Fates, a trick and exchange on a divine level. So while Apollo's interest in altering the course of events comes from his experience of friendship on a mortal level, it is because he is still divine that he has the ability to do so. This series of exchanges also elevates Admetus' status. He participates in trade not only with the quasi-mortal Apollo but also with Death and the Fates in their full divinity. Admetus is the one to participate in the transaction, "giving in exchange another corpse to the gods below" (Ἄδμητον... / ἄλλον διαλλάξαντα τοῖς κάτω νεκρόν, 13-14). Though he is not the instigator, Admetus receives from Apollo and the Fates the ability to act in avoidance of his appointed death. Though only temporarily, he attains an aspect of immortality because of Apollo's actions.

⁷⁴ Luschnig 1992 and Padilla 2000 demonstrate the instability brought about in *Alcestis* due to this disruption of the proper order, Luschnig in social/literary and Padilla in social/economic terms. A similar perspective can be applied in religious terms.

Admetus is not, as some have suggested, merely a passive recipient of the gift; he engages with the divine, participates in an exchange, and alters his religious status as a result.⁷⁵

Apollo's divinity gives him the ability to intervene with the Fates and prevent Admetus' death. But it is in his mortal disguise, as a herder serving Admetus, that Euripides compares him to the mortal Orpheus who also wields power over death. The chorus reflects on Apollo's time of servitude in Admetus' house in a decidedly Orphic scene: wild animals dance to the sound of his music, and feed peacefully with the flocks (579-87).⁷⁶ The passage is fitting for Apollo, with his musical attributes, and for the play's theme of return from Hades to the living world. Euripides makes other Orphic references in the course of the play, fitting for the theme of restoration to life. Admetus declares that if he had the skills of Orpheus, he would bring his wife back from Hades (357-62) and the chorus finds no cure for necessity among his writings (966-69). These references highlight the powerlessness of mortals against death. Admetus longs for his special power, but the chorus acknowledges that even Orpheus was unable to truly defeat death. Without even the limited abilities of Orpheus, these mortal characters have no recourse. For Apollo, though, the reference draws attention to his divinity. Orpheus' music is extraordinary because it gives him, a mortal, godlike control over the natural world and even over the forces of death. Apollo, in contrast, is unusual in this scene because he is acting as a mortal despite his divinity. His divinity has already enabled him to successfully rescue Admetus from death. But like Orpheus, he has limitations; Alcestis still dies. The references to Orpheus also anticipate the

⁷⁵ Padilla places Admetus in a lower sphere of exchange than Apollo, Alcestis, and Heracles: he is able to offer only *xenia*, and is only a recipient in the trading of lives (2000, 186). The argument downplays Admetus' own involvement in making the exchange.

⁷⁶ Parker 2007, 173; Dale 1954, 100

second rescuer, Heracles, a mortal demi-god like Orpheus and similarly able to perform a *katabasis* to the underworld to bring someone back.

While Apollo emphasizes his bond to Admetus and his temporary status as a quasi-mortal, there remains a divide between him and true mortals. Apollo appears at stage level, but unlike mortal prologues he has no onstage interaction with mortals (Dale 1954, 9-10). It is clear that he has interacted with Admetus and his household prior to the prologue, but he is now removed from them by time and distance. Even in his speech relating his friendship with and rescue of Admetus, he spends nearly as many lines on the divine events behind the story as he does on Admetus' part.⁷⁷ While he expresses sympathy for the death of Alcestis (42), his sorrow is brief and restrained in comparison to the response of her mortal family and friends. His divinity prevents him from even staying to comfort his grieving friend. The threat of *miasma* is too great and because of his divinity he must stay away from mortal death, even a death in a most beloved household (22-23).⁷⁸ Yet Apollo has no trouble carrying on conversation with Thanatos himself immediately following his departure from the house. Segal calls the claim of *miasma* illogical as a result, and Thorburn cites Iphigenia's criticism of Artemis for a similar inconsistency.⁷⁹ (1992, 97; 2002, 60). In both cases, the difference can be explained by the distance between mortality and divinity, and the power of ritual: it is only the human experience

⁷⁷ 5 lines on Asclepius to 4 on Apollo's servitude, 3 on the Fates to 6 on Admetus' rescue

⁷⁸ On the unfeeling nature of Apollo's comments, see Luschnig 1995, 18; Lefkowitz 2016, 101. Artemis justifies her similarly restrained reaction to Hippolytus' suffering: "I see it; but it is unlawful to shed tears from my eyes" (ὁρῶ κατ' ὄσσω δ' οὐ θέμις βαλεῖν δάκρυ, *Hipp.* 1396). She implies a distinction between grief felt and displayed, imposed by divine law, similar to the mandate to avoid death itself.

⁷⁹ Segal 1992, 97; Thorburn 2002, 60; *IT* 380-83. Iphigenia complains that Artemis drives away mortals with any kind of blood impurity, while accepting human sacrifices at her altar.

of death that threatens the gods, and ritual treatments of death like Thanatos' death-rites and the human sacrifices to Artemis at Tauris mediate between this mortal experience and divine interests.

When Thanatos joins Apollo onstage, the divide between Apollo and Admetus grows. The two gods engage in a verbal contest over Alcestis' impending death. The conversation treats mortal lives as objects for trade and means for reward. Thanatos claims that Apollo has "robbed" him (νοσφιεῖς, 43) of the body that Apollo had "traded" (ἀμείψας, 46) for Admetus. His only concern is "taking delight in my prerogatives" (τιμαῖς κάμῃ τέρπεσθαι, 53) and the "honor" he gains from mortal deaths (γέρας, 55). Apollo attempts to persuade him with mention of "wealthier" funerals (πλουσίως, 56) and asks for her life as a "favor" (χάριν, 60), both unsuccessfully. But at no point does the conversation consider the mortals in question as persons or subjects or show any regard for their desires. The scene jerks sharply away from the intermediate space in which mortals and divinities engage with one another, into the world of inscrutable divine authority, indifferent to the experience of the mortals affected.⁸⁰

The exchange between Apollo and Thanatos reinforces the distance between Admetus and Apollo; however, it also demonstrates the way in which gods participate, formally and informally, in religious actions among themselves and in relation to mortals, as part of a single network. Thanatos appears onstage as "priest of the dead" (ἱερέα θανόντων, 25) and speaks in religious language as if "begin(ning) a ritual" (κατάρξωμαι, 74).⁸¹ He makes it clear that his social status among the gods depends on his ritual participation in mortal deaths – from them

⁸⁰ Knox 1991, 226 and 228; Parker 2007, 50

⁸¹ Parker 2007, 57 and 67. Dale believes this comes from Phrynicus (1954, xii).

come his “prerogatives” and “honors” (τιμὰς, 30; τιμαῖς, 53; γέρας, 55). In turn his ritual action benefits other gods; he refers collectively to “the gods below (the earth)” as interested parties (ἐνέρων, 30, and τῶν κατὰ χθονὸς θεῶν, 75). Apollo, by rewarding Admetus and tricking the Fates into granting a trade, has interfered with Thanatos’ religious position. He voices his complaint in legal language: “are you wronging me further, appropriating the prerogatives of those below?” (ἀδικεῖς αὖ τιμὰς ἐνέρων / ἀφοριζόμενος, 30-31): Twice he implies physical force, referring to Apollo’s bow: “Are you standing guard, armed with bow in hand... what need for your bow, then?” (χέρα τοξήρη φρουρεῖς ὀπλίσας... τί δῆτα τόξων ἔργον, 35, 39). The bow, as Apollo retorts, is an aspect of his divine identity rather than an immediate threat of violence “it is customary for me to carry these always” (σύνηθες αἰεὶ ταῦτα βαστάζειν ἐμοί, 40). But symbolically, the bow – that is to say, Apollo’s status as Olympian with all the power and influence that implies – is the threat to Thanatos’ rights. In conflicts between two gods, the one closer to Zeus comes out on top (Lefkowitz 2016, 101). Apollo’s superior religious status has interfered, and continues to interfere, with Thanatos’ death rituals.

Thanatos is obviously low in status among the gods, receiving his tasks from those above him: “I have been assigned this” (τοῦτο γὰρ τετάγμεθα, 49). In language and meter he appears as lesser than other gods; he speaks in recitative, almost unheard of for tragic gods, and uses a third-person plural in reference to himself, a sign of humility and used rarely in tragedy by gods.⁸²

Apollo treats him with disdain, expressing surprise at his ability to debate: “are you secretly

⁸² Parker 2007, 49 and 62. Note that Apollo also uses the third-person plural in 70. Paradoxically, he does so while asserting his dominance over Thanatos, declaring that the latter will lose his honors and have nothing in return when Heracles rescues Alcestis. The effect is an ironic sense of false humility, unlike the sense of Thanatos’ use to indicate his own lower position.

clever?” (σοφὸς λέληθας ὦν; 58) and calling his character “hateful to mortals and despised by the gods” (ἐχθρούς γε θνητοῖς καὶ θεοῖς στυγούμενους, 62). In both his function and the regard of others Thanatos stands between the mortal and divine worlds, a liminal figure as death itself is liminal. Apollo interferes with the mortal experience of death because of his temporary lower status that brings him closer to the human world. But the divide remains; he has to abandon the house of Admetus at the actual presence of death and fails to gain any real escape from the reality of death. On the other hand, Thanatos is able to engage directly with human death because of his long-term status. Though he is scorned by Apollo as hateful and lacks the status or authority of higher gods, in the actual event of death he holds the upper hand. Apollo can ask and threaten, but he does not stop him. He can only promise interference from another – one who, like Thanatos, will be able to stand in between mortality and divinity.

Mortal Rituals in Life and Death

As a rule, mortals are helpless in the face of greater forces like fate, necessity, the will of Zeus, and death. Yet they continue to struggle against them, attempting to escape their fate, avoid death, and turn events to their own design. This futile struggle of mortals despite fate and divine power appears again and again in Greek tragedy. In *Alcestis*, the inevitability of death and necessity is a constant refrain: there is no option but for Alcestis to die. Yet Admetus, Alcestis, and their friends continue to do all they can to prevent it or to exert some control over it. Before her death they use ritual to seek divine assistance. Afterwards they honor her in a variety of rites and promised rites that offer a partial continuation of life and even an element of divinity. Their religious response to her death is rooted in typical funeral rites but far exceeds them. Although they cannot prevent or reverse her death, they blur the divide between living and dead. Alcestis,

though dead, is in some sense still alive; Admetus and his house, on the other hand, have entered a sort of living death. For a short time, mortal rituals, though unable to make any drastic changes, shift Alcestis and Admetus out of their normal mortal status into something more.

Before the play has even begun, Admetus has already sought out all possible divine assistance, making sacrifices in an attempt to keep Alcestis alive (133-35).⁸³ But both before and after her death, the chorus makes it clear that no sacrifice will help, no god's power can reverse necessity (119-20, 963-75). "This goddess alone," they say, has "no altars to approach, nor an image; she does not listen to sacrifices" (μόνας δ' οὐτ' ἐπὶ βωμοῦς / ἐλθεῖν οὔτε βρέτας θεᾶς / ἔστιν, οὐ σφαγίων κλύει, 973-75).⁸⁴ The chorus lists typical ritual actions by which humans can engage in their religious system. Here, their means of influence are not accepted and they are left powerless in their usual status. Mortals' primary religious recourse, sacrifices to ask for favor and help, are in the chorus' view useless. Yet for all the focus on the inevitability of death and fate, *Alcestis* is about escaping them (Lloyd 1985, 123-24). While conventional practices have had no effect, Alcestis and Admetus do find rituals by which they can influence the circumstances in some way, and Apollo and Heracles both enjoy a special status that facilitates more effective changes to fate. The chorus specifically mentions Apollo and Asclepius as unable to reverse the situation. The mention highlights Apollo's failure to rescue Alcestis in the

⁸³ These lines are marked as spurious by Wilamowitz, Wheeler, and others, but Dale and Parker argue for their authenticity (1954, 64; 2007, 82). Wilamowitz' objection that they were interpolated at a later period when Asclepius was considered a god, is unconvincing both because of evidence of sanctuaries of Asclepius at Epidaurus and elsewhere in the 5th century, and because (as Parker argues) the lines refer to altars in very broad terms, not specifically Asclepius' altars but those of all gods. Admetus has left no possible resource untried.

⁸⁴ Typically it is Death, not personified Necessity, called the 'cultless god' (Dale 1954, 121). The two are closely related, especially in this play; death is the ultimate necessity for all mortals, and the immediate necessity for Alcestis here.

prologue, but it also admits the fact that death is not always inevitable. Apollo has already outwitted the Fates, stolen from Thanatos – known to be as unmovable by mortal religious practice as necessity is here – and promised another victory to come. Asclepius is only unable to help because he is dead; he did have the power to bring back mortals from death (121-30). The problem is not a complete impossibility of fate’s reversal, but a lack of access to the extraordinary position from which Apollo and Asclepius were able to mediate between life and death.

Although unable to prevent Alcestis’ death, the mortal characters take what control they can over death by their unusual participation in funeral rituals. Admetus, after acknowledging that death is inevitable, invites the Chorus to mourn in what Parker reads as a “challenge in the face of death” (2007, 14): “sing in retort a paean without libation to the god below” (ἀντηχίσατε / παιᾶνα τῷ κάτωθεν ἄσπονδον θεῶ, 423-4). The entire line depicts a ritual out of the ordinary for death rites, and with a distinct sense of hostility. Ἀντηχέω, though later used more neutrally of musical harmony, occurs only one other time in Attic poetry, where it clearly signifies opposition.⁸⁵ The song he commands is a paean – a song usually given not to Hades (or perhaps Thanatos) but to the Olympians, and used as a call for help and thanks for rescue (Parker 2007, 140).⁸⁶ The choice of song voices complaint against the pitilessness of Hades by setting it in

⁸⁵ Parker 2007, 140. The other use is spoken by the chorus in *Medea*: “I would have sung a hymn in retort to the race of men” (ἀντάχισ’ ἂν ὕμνον ἀρσένων γέννα, 426-27). The chorus challenges the notion of male superiority and female faithlessness. In contrast, (Pseudo)-Aristotle later uses ἀντηχέω to signify harmonious vibrations (*Pr.* 919^b16).

⁸⁶ The line likely refers to Hades but is vague enough to allow conflation or alternate interpretation. Compare to 259-62, in which Alcestis seems to conflate Hades, Hermes, and Thanatos in her description of her own death (Parker 2007, 109; Dale 1954, 72).

contrast with the attainable aid of the gods above.⁸⁷ Finally, Admetus specifies that the paean will be without libation.⁸⁸ While Hades is not given libations, the paean is typically accompanied by them; the ritual Admetus suggests is therefore both suitable and inappropriate. He is perhaps implying that Hades is missing out on potential honors because of his refusal to aid or pity mortals. The libationless paean draws attention to the lack of religious activity between mortals and Hades, and the benefits lost by both mortals and the god as a result.

Following this brief challenge against Hades, Admetus turns to ritual excess as a response to Alcestis' death. Not just his household, but his entire kingdom, will be in mourning (425-31). Every subject will cut their hair and dress in black as if their own relative had died, and even the horses will be shorn. This unusual practice appears in a few other works as an expression of extravagant grief.⁸⁹ The complete lack of music and the full year's duration add to the sense of excess. Critics have explained this in various ways: in one view, it is seen as a mere use of motifs to fill out the formal pattern needed by Euripides in this speech; in another, a grandiose psychological response to guilt or grief.⁹⁰ From a religious viewpoint, and in combination with the paean challenge, I read it as an attempt by Admetus to assert what control he can over the

⁸⁷ Parker cites other instances in Aeschylus and Euripides where a paean is used in the context of death for what he calls "shock-effect," with various results: Aesch. *Ag.* 645, *Cho.* 151, *Sept.* 869-70; Eur. *Tro.* 578, *Hel.* 178 (2007, 140)

⁸⁸ See Parker for a complete discussion of ἄσπονδον versus the received ἀσπόνδῳ, for stylistic and interpretive reasons (2007, 141). Whether the line calls the paean or the god libationless, however, the contrast between reciprocal religious rites and Hades' nonparticipation remains.

⁸⁹ The Persians in Boeotia shear their horses in mourning for Masistius (Hdt. 9.24); the Thessalians and Boeotian allies do so for Pelopidas (Plut. *Vit. Pel.* 33); Alexander orders it for Hephaestion (Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 72). Parker speculates that the practice adds local color, as all these examples occur in the north of mainland Greece (Parker 2007, 142)

⁹⁰ Dale 1954, 81. Dale herself reads it as a sincere expression of grief, and attributes scholarly misgivings to differences in cultural sensibilities.

situation. Hades admits no religious interaction with mortals through ritual or sacrifice, and Alcestis' death cannot be undone. But Admetus can modify his own ritual response and use his political authority to express in a grand way his grief and his wife's worth.

Alcestis, before her death, likewise uses ritual to assert herself in the face of the inevitable. Her maid gives a striking description of the woman preparing for her own death (159-72). She begins by purifying herself with river water and dressing in her finest clothing as if attending to her own corpse (158-61; Parker 2007, 86) She also prepares the house by honoring all of its altars (170-72) and especially stops to pray at the altar of Hestia (162ff.). To this goddess she entrusts her children's future, which she can no longer look after herself. With each action, Alcestis extends her authority and agency beyond the moment of her death. She prepares her own body, rather than waiting to be acted upon by others after death; she leaves visible reminders of her presence at the household altars, where she prays for the house's future wellbeing; and she entrusts her place as mother to the divine equivalent of the woman of the house. For as the wife is the one who controls, operates, and is the life of the home's interior, so is Hestia the undying center of the home (Luschnig 1992, 20; Parker 2007, 87). While she cannot escape death herself, she can ask for this divine surrogate to protect her interests. Through ritual interaction with the goddess, Alcestis preserves her role in the home beyond her death.

As Alcestis extends herself beyond death in the cult of Hestia, Admetus and the chorus both offer her some degree of continuation through her own cult. While promises of cult activity are a normal occurrence in Euripides, they are typically offered by an epilogue god (Knox 1991, 223; Dunn 1996, 48). Here mortals make promises and predictions without divine authority, but with confidence in the merit of Alcestis' virtue and her worthiness of cult honors. Their promises of ritual rewards elevate themselves as ones with the authority to establish cult, and Alcestis as

greater than the average mortal. They justify these honors with reference to her extraordinary excellence as a wife: ἀρίστη is the claim voiced by Alcestis herself as well as Admetus, the chorus, the maid, and Heracles.⁹¹ Her actions for Admetus have earned her the honors given to those who surpass mortal status, not gods but heroes who enjoy some elements of divinity and continued influence among the living after death. Her outstanding virtue parallels the military excellence of an epic hero or the athletic prowess of an epinician honoree; Euripides draws on both genres, framing Alcestis death (and her return) in terms of familiar, masculine poetic virtues (Garner 1988, 58-71). With such heroic status comes an element of continued existence after death, the κλέος ἄφθιτον of epic and the quasi-divinization of athletes in epinician.⁹²

The chorus promises that Alcestis will be remembered in song in Sparta and Athens (445-54). At Sparta they will sing of her at the Carneia, a musical festival in honor of Apollo. No details of the setting at Athens are given, but it is easy to assume Euripides means the dramatic festivals, in reference to *Alcestis* itself (Parker 2007, 149-51). Beyond the self-referential element, there does not appear to be any special significance to the particular festivals named. Apollo's link to the Carneia would be noticeable, but there is no clear significance for interpretation in the specifics of the setting. What does matter to the chorus is that her fame will be widespread (Parker 2007, 150) and that it will be integrated into public religious festivals. The religious context of these songs hints at the cult honors for Alcestis that the chorus later predicts

⁹¹ Dale 1954, 59. Alcestis is called ἀρίστη in 83 (chorus), 151 (chorus), 152 (slave-woman), 235 (chorus), 240 (chorus), 324 (herself), 442 (chorus), 742 (chorus), and 899 (Admetus). The word is used elsewhere in the play only once, spoken by Admetus in reference to Heracles (559). There is one additional possible occurrence, a reference by Admetus to his and Alcestis' ancestors (991), where the received form is ἀρίστων but Parker argues for ἀριστέων, from ἀριστεύς, in reference more specifically to excellence in valor (2007, 236).

⁹² Athletes also enjoy quasi-divine status beyond epinician; see Kindt 2012 on statues of athletes at Olympia being worshipped like gods, 130ff.

more explicitly; epilogue gods sometimes incorporate similar references to memorialization of the person or persons in festival settings.⁹³

Following Admetus' lament upon returning from the funeral rites, the chorus commemorates Alcestis in song (963-1005). They speak first of necessity's force, then of Alcestis' death and virtue, and finally of the honors her tomb should receive. They comfort Admetus with a reminder that even gods' children must die (989-90), then immediately suggest for Alcestis honors like those given to demigods and Golden-age heroes (Dale 1954, 123): "do not think of your wife's tomb like a mound of decaying corpses, but let it be honored like the gods, a place of reverence for travelers" (μηδὲ νεκρῶν ὡς φθιμένων χῶμα νομιζέσθω / τύμβος σαῶς ἀλόχου, θεοῖσι δ' ὁμοίως / τιμάσθω, σέβας ἐμπόρων, 995-99). The chorus predicts that her tomb will receive honors from strangers on the road. This sort of hero-cult is given in post-Homeric times to humans for some exceptional virtue or deeds, not only to mythical semi-divine figures (Parker 2007, 250-51). It is also a typical element of divine epilogues in Euripides. However, the language of the chorus is suggestive enough for Mikalson to say that Alcestis is temporarily conceived of as a goddess (1991, 35). Τιμάσθω refers to the tomb but can as easily refer to the woman, and the chorus glosses the gods' altars as θεοῖσι, the gods. The chorus slips from comparing tomb and sanctuary into comparing mortal and divine, suggesting that Alcestis is the latter (Parker 2007, 250).

⁹³ e.g. *Hipp.* 1428-30, *IT* 1458-61.

Σέβας, reverence, will be hers; in fact elsewhere Admetus uses the verb σέβειν twice to honor Alcestis.⁹⁴ The verb is typically reserved for worship of the gods, and although Dale sees no indication of religious significance in the first instance, she makes no comment on the second use which adds emphasis. Additionally, the chorus' cult promises make it much easier to take the word in a formal religious sense.⁹⁵ The chorus pushes the implication of divinity for Alcestis to an extreme in 1004, in which each of three phrases is typically associated with gods: "Farewell, O lady, grant us your favor (χαῖρ', ὦ πότνι', εὖ δὲ δοίης, 1004). The text is impossible to translate with the appropriate religious weight, because similarly loaded words in English bear distracting Judeo-Christian associations. But each of the three phrases, ascending in syllables, words, and suggestiveness, implies the status and power of a goddess.⁹⁶

In addition to receiving honors in this public hero-cult promised by the chorus, Alcestis will be commemorated in a private way by Admetus. His promise to keep a statue of her in his bed has potential religious implications:

δέμας τὸ σὸν
 εἰκασθὲν ἐν λέκτροισιν ἐκταθήσεται,
 ᾧ προσπεσοῦμαι καὶ περιπτύσσων χέρας
 ὄνομα καλῶν σὸν τὴν φίλην ἐν ἀγκάλαις
 δόξω γυναῖκα καίπερ οὐκ ἔχων ἔχειν' (348-52)

An image of you will be spread out on the bed, and I will fall before it and throwing my arms around it and calling your beloved name I will seem to both have and not have my wife in my arms.

⁹⁴ "For I will reverence your friendship," σὴν γὰρ φίλιαν σεβόμεσθα (279); "but she is worthy of reverence from me," ἀξία δέ μοι σέβειν (1060).

⁹⁵ Dale 1954, 74; Parker grants more weight to the word, particularly in its repetition (2007, 112 and 261-2).

⁹⁶ See Parker for the significance of these phrases (2007, 180 and 251).

The location of this scene in the marriage-bed, the arms thrown around the statue, and the calling of her name, all contribute to the sense that Admetus is imagining an erotic encounter with this statue. This is reinforced by his promise to never take a new wife; the statue becomes a replacement for a living spouse. Statues of the dead, however, are typically associated with ritual honors for a tomb or cult; and one might fall before (προσπεσοῦμαι) and throw arms around (περιπτύσσων χέρας) a god in supplication just as much as they might fall on and embrace a beloved in an erotic sense. Stieber also notes that the verb used for laying out the statue on the bed (ἐκταθήσεται) is associated with the treatment of corpses. She argues that the language of the scene suggests a funerary statue (Stieber 1998, 71-74). Admetus combines the religious honors of a hero-cult's tomb with the marital context of his bedroom. The link between eros and ritual is perhaps unusual, but natural in the context of honoring a deceased spouse.⁹⁷ Admetus' private grief in the marriage-bed parallels Alcestis' earlier display of grief in that same place after her visit to each household altar (176ff.). Her final ritual observances in the house culminate in an erotic lament. Additionally, there are a number of examples in the Greek tradition of *amalgatophilia*, or erotic attraction to a cult image, in addition to myths involving erotic attraction to personal statues. Kindt interprets such stories as expressions of an individual's desire to achieve some level of closeness with the divine, or experience divinity themselves (Kindt 2012, 161-89).

⁹⁷ The cultic and erotic are so intermixed that critics, wanting to declare one interpretation or the other, have come to very different conclusions about its meaning. Dale sees it as erotic; Thorburn argues against this (1954, 79; 2002, xl). Wilamowitz points to the story of Protesilaus and Laodameia, which mixes cult pretense with erotic motives (in Parker 2007, 122-23). Buxton notes that the statue keeps Alcestis alive in a sense, suggesting ritual; and Parker writes it off as "extravagant and bizarre" (1987, 205; 2007, 123).

The statue Admetus promises will have the same effect as the songs predicted by the chorus and the actions of Alcestis herself: it will preserve her in a fashion. Admetus will “both have and not have (his) wife” (γυναῖκα καίπερ οὐκ ἔχων ἔχειν, 352).⁹⁸ He also hopes that she will visit him in his dreams, which the Greeks saw as a temporary return from the underworld and a special privilege granted to some of the dead by the gods below (354-56). Preserving her from death is certainly his desire; immediately after promising the statue he declares his wish to win her back from Hades, were he able to as Orpheus was (357-62). Admetus lacks the extraordinary power needed, and his pleas to Alcestis not to die are entirely ineffective; nor does he have any more divine connections to prevent her death as Apollo prevented his. But he can turn to the ordinary human means he has to diminish the completeness of death. Though it seems small and incomplete, Admetus’ statue-cult is also a religious action that mediates between life and death, mortality and divinity. It will make Alcestis the object of veneration, much like the cult of her tomb promised by the chorus, and it will partially extend her existence among mortals long after her death.

Through the entire tragedy there is a marked disruption of the distinction between life and death, a favorite ambiguity for Euripides but especially prominent in this play as the entire plot is about navigating this boundary.⁹⁹ Alcestis in particular, both before and after the actual event of her death, is stuck in between the two states of being (Buxton 1987, 205). The chorus opens the play uncertain about whether she is still living (80-82) but even when her status becomes clearer, the ambiguity remains. The slave woman tells the chorus that “you could say that she is both

⁹⁸ Buxton 1987, 205; Thorburn 2002, xli

⁹⁹ Parker 2007, 83; Gregory 1991, 27; Thorburn 2002, xxxiv

living and dead” (καὶ ζῶσαν εἰπεῖν καὶ θανοῦσαν ἔστι σοι, 141). Admetus later tells Heracles that “she is and is no longer (alive)” (ἔστιν τε κούκέτ’ ἔστιν, 521). This “double speech” as Admetus calls it (διπλοῦς... μῦθος, 519), indicates in the first instance that Alcestis, though living, is fated to die; in the second it helps Admetus deceive Heracles. But they are more than clever figures of speech; they reflect an actual ambiguity about Alcestis’ status. They bring to mind the practices with which Alcestis and Admetus will preserve her existence beyond death, and the reality that her future existence is in the balance. For all the talk of necessity, her rescue is imminent.

Euripides writes a similar line referring to the Dioskouroi: “they are dead, and they are not dead; it is a double story” (τεθνᾶσι καὶ οὐ τεθνᾶσι: δύο δ’ ἐστὸν λόγῳ, *Hel.* 138). In this instance, Teucer means that on the one hand they killed themselves, but on the other hand they are said to be gods now, a report which is shown to be true. His double speech signifies the space in between mortal death and immortal divinity, which the Dioskouroi have crossed. Similarly, Alcestis is in the midst of transition between life and death but likewise in a state between mortality and true immortality. That she is dead indicates the failure on Apollo’s part to preserve the house of Admetus from death entirely, and the inevitability of fate. That she is also living shows the power of human practices to mitigate the forces of fate and death, and anticipates the intervention of Heracles, who will more completely reverse death and preserve life.

Even in the moment of her death Alcestis’ fate seems ambiguous. She exits the house seemingly about to die, and sees Charon, who rebukes her for delaying (255-56). She feels Hades (or perhaps Thanatos or Hermes) trying to drag her below, and appears to be at the very moment of death: “Somebody is leading me – don’t you see? – to the hall of the dead... why are you

dragging me? Let go” (ἄγει μέ τις – οὐχ ὀρθῶς; ... τί ρέξεις; ἄφες, 259-62).¹⁰⁰ Her vivid experience of being pulled down suggests that she is all but dead. Yet a few lines later she begins a lengthy speech and rational exchange with Admetus (280-383). Dale argues that this is merely the product of formal convention, by which characters address a situation first in emotional lyric, then in rational iambic (1954, 74-75). But Alcestis’ opening speech is more than merely emotional, it is expressive of the very moment of death (Parker 2007, 110). Convention is a difficult argument to make here, as an onstage death is itself highly unconventional. The closest comparison is to the death of Hippolytus, who declares soon after his entrance that he is “heading to a foreseen Hades.” (προϋπτον ἐς Ἄϊδην στείχω, *Hipp.* 1366). But his early lament is focused on his experience of pain, and he does not vividly encounter death until his last twenty lines: “I have died, and I see the gates of those below” (ὄλωλα καὶ δὴ νερτέρων ὀρῶ πύλας, 1447). In *Alcestis*, the arrangement makes Alcestis seem to linger, suspended in between life and death. As in her earlier rituals within the house, she provides for the continued life of her house and her children.¹⁰¹ She ensures through Admetus’ oath that, though dead, she will retain her place as wife and mother. Thus, in the moment of her death Alcestis remains alive, and ensures that she will continue after her death.

¹⁰⁰ The identity of the one dragging her is ambiguous. She calls it Hades but describes it as winged, and Hades traditionally does not have wings. The function of transporting the dead is Hermes’, and the wings fit Thanatos (Parker 2007, 109). The identity is not critical to the scene’s interpretation. Buxton reads the appearance of Charon and “Hades” as an aspect of Alcestis’ intermediacy throughout the play. She does not descend to Hades, signifying the finality of death, but is met by figures who cross the boundaries, signifying that she is still in transition and locating her physically on the threshold between life and death (1987, 205).

¹⁰¹ See Luschnig on the house as Alcestis (1992, 20); Dellner on preserving her status and her children (2000, 10 and 17-18).

While Alcestis lingers in the ambiguous state of being both living and dead, Admetus and his entire house are likewise in uncertainty. The disruption in the normal progression of death begun by Apollo has resulted in continued life despite death for Alcestis, and the opposite – living death – for Admetus.¹⁰² He focuses his expressions of grief on his own death. He says that hearing his wife dying is “painful to hear and greater to me than all death” (λυπρὸν ἀκούειν / καὶ παντὸς ἐμοὶ θανάτου μείζον, 273-74) and imagining his future in a house in Hades rather than in Pherae (363-64). After Alcestis’ burial he wishes for death (864-69), declares her happier than him (935-36), and doubts any benefit in his continued life (960). He plans a life devoted to mourning her death: no music or revelry, no parents or new wife (328-47), no happiness within the house or outside it (939-53). The paradox is clear: Admetus escapes death by asking Alcestis to die in his place; but her death has rendered his life like, or worse than, death. This living death has been attributed to the failure of Alcestis and Admetus to adequately reverse death, and to the problems of introducing divine gifts into a mortal system.¹⁰³ Apollo is equally responsible for the current state of affairs, as he engineered the life of one and the death of the other.

In response to the reality of death, the mortal household turns to a variety of religious actions. Admetus uses his friendship with a powerful god to successfully engage in an exchange of lives on the divine level, beyond his own capacity for exchange. He and his household use prayer and sacrifice to ask for divine help, and to challenge and criticize the unresponsiveness of Hades. When the gods are unhelpful, the mortals use rituals to mitigate the effects of death. None

¹⁰² As noted by Lloyd 1985, 126; Gregory 1991, 27.

¹⁰³ Lloyd on the couple’s failure (1985, 119). On disrupting the mortal system see Dellner 2000, 9; Luschnig 1992, 13; Padilla 2000, 186; Gregory 1991, 27

of these rituals allow them to avoid death or become immortal, but they help Alcestis to extend her influence in the house beyond her death and elevate her status to that of a hero or quasi-god. She is still dead, but her death is less complete. She remains in an intermediate state between life and death and moves closer to divinity than she was during her lifetime. In sum, the play shows mortal religious actions to be inadequate against the inevitable power of death. But it also reveals the power of their actions. Alcestis, Admetus, and the entire household are changed by their responses to death. They move out of their usual mortal status, into intermediate spaces between life and death, mortality and divinity. While all ritual has the power to change its participants, in *Alcestis* Euripides makes its effects on mortals particularly apparent. The high stakes of life and death and the closeness to divinity experienced by Admetus and Heracles create a situation in which mortals' ritual ability and the changes it effects are enhanced.

Heracles' Double Melody

In the midst of this uncertainty Heracles enters, as promised by Apollo, on his way to complete one of his labors. His appearance marks a shift in the play, the beginning of a second plot and a change in tone.¹⁰⁴ Heracles is as much a comic character as a tragic one, and his drunken revelry makes a jarring contrast with Admetus' mourning. He also parallels Apollo: a second prologue, a second guest of Admetus, and a second rescue from death. Unlike Apollo, however, Heracles appears as a demi-god only, still in his mortal form. He does not experience the limitations on interfering with mortal affairs that come with divine status. At the same time, he enjoys some element of divine power because of his lineage, and the audience is aware of the

¹⁰⁴ On double plots see Dale 1954, 108; Garner 1988, 68-70; Castellani 1979, 488

future divinity he will possess. As a figure in between worlds, Heracles is the ideal person to rescue the house of Admetus, stuck as it is between life and death.

Euripides makes Heracles a clear double of the prologue Apollo in dramatic structure, function in the plot, and divine status. Castellani identifies Heracles' appearance, alone and then with the servant, as a second prologue. Additionally, he observes a number of verbal and dramatic parallels between the two halves of the play that support this reading (1979, 488-96). Like Apollo and Thanatos, Heracles and the slave speak both individually and together on an empty stage without the chorus present. Elsewhere in Euripides, Dale notes, this occurs only in prologues, with the single exception of *Helen* 386-434 and 483-514 (1954, 108). While Dale does not find any significance in this arrangement, the scene includes a number of verbal parallels to the prologue as well, leading Castellani to suggest an intentional doubling (1979, 489). The social dynamic between the prologue speakers is likewise parallel: the Olympian Apollo speaks with his social inferior Thanatos, while the semi-divine, noble-blooded Heracles speaks with a household slave. The order of appearance is reversed, with the lower-class slave appearing first when Thanatos came second; also reversed is the parallel tension between resignation, voiced by Apollo and the slave, and resolve, voiced by Thanatos and Heracles (Castellani 1979, 489). The reversal connects the prologue with its double while indicating a change in the course of events to come in the second half. Death and despair dominate in the first half, but in the second they give way to hope and restoration. Both in broad structure and in the specific details of the two scenes, Euripides links Heracles to Apollo and indicates a new beginning in this second half of the play.

Heracles is also similar to Apollo by his slave status and his guest-relationship with Admetus. Like Apollo, Heracles comes to Pherae having been forced into a servile role (to

Eurystheus) as a result of divine punishment (by Hera) and enjoys the hospitality of Admetus. As Apollo plays music in the fields, Heracles sings in the house (575-87, 760-62). Finally, in return for Admetus' virtue he intervenes against death, bringing Alcestis back from the grave as Apollo allows Admetus to escape it. Apollo links the two rescues himself in his parting words to Thanatos, predicting that a man is on his way to take Alcestis back by force (64-71).¹⁰⁵ He presents the coming intervention by Heracles explicitly as a continuation of his own. The two are contrasted as well. One is a humbled god and the other a mortal soon to be deified; one meets Admetus as his slave, the other as his guest; one delays death, the other reverses it. Admetus' relationship with Apollo begins as that of master and worker rather than *xenia* between equals, and when Apollo reveals his identity it becomes that of god and mortal; their relationship is imbalanced in both directions. Additionally, Heracles is en route to another destination rather than intending to stay in Phraeae.¹⁰⁶ The nature of their rescue from death differs also, a trade in Apollo's case and outright theft in Heracles'. The differences between these two sons of Zeus and their outcomes are central to our understanding of religious status and its relationship to ritual in *Alcestis*.

The final parallel, again with key differences, offers a way of understanding the overall comparison between Apollo and Heracles. Both figures occupy a space between divinity and

¹⁰⁵ These lines are often deleted as interpolations because they reveal the ending of the play (Dale 1954, 57; Parker 2007, 66). However, suspense is not an issue for Greek tragedy; the stories are already familiar to the audience. The skill of the tragedian is in bringing suitable emotion and language to a story, not keeping the audience guessing about how it will end. Lush details the ways Euripides uses mythological references in the play to create suspense from "imagined alternatives" rather than an unknown ending (2012, 385-408).

¹⁰⁶ It is an oddity of this play that Apollo's time as servant in Admetus' house is so commonly regarded as an example of *xenia*. The chorus links Apollo's stay to Heracles' (579-605), and Apollo's regard for Admetus as a friend and a devout man is fitting for guest-friendship, rather than the relationship of master and servant.

mortality, in which they have an extraordinary ability to interfere in the regular process of death. Though Heracles appears as a mortal, not yet an Olympian god or even a cult hero, he is the one to provide a resolution to the crisis. For this reason, scholars sometimes identify him as a pseudo-*deus ex machina* (Von Fritz 1968, 80; Goldfarb 1992, 125). While this claim is appealing for its parallel to the initial intervention by Apollo, it is unsupported by any formal analysis of the scene. Heracles remains at stage level, and does not claim divine authority, appeal to Zeus or fate, or promise ritual consolations. Unlike mortal characters commanded by an epilogue god, Admetus resists Heracles' command rather than accepting it immediately. However, Heracles does successfully resolve the play's crisis and does so with a mixture of mortal and divine attributes that suggest his future divinity and contribute to his ability to help Admetus.

Though he appears first in the middle of the play, not at its conclusion, Heracles' sudden unannounced arrival indicates a dramatic shift, the beginning of the plot's reversal.¹⁰⁷ In this scene, however, the emphasis is very much on Heracles as a mortal. He is in the midst of his labors, and the chorus remarks pointedly on the danger of death he is facing (488). He calls himself son of Alcmena, focusing on his mortal lineage (505); Admetus recognizes him as son of Zeus, half-divine (509). His second appearance, after the slave's monologue, is likewise unannounced (773). This entrance is perhaps less marked as he has already been onstage and the slave has just finished speaking of him. In this scene Heracles speaks to the slave with language that may suggest god-like authority. He begins by addressing the slave with the demonstrative οὗτος. This word as a vocative address contains a hint of rudeness or impatience, and typically

¹⁰⁷ 476ff. The shift is recognizable only to audience, who have already heard from Apollo that a man is arriving to bring back Alcestis, and not to the characters onstage (Parker 2007, 155).

belongs to common and comic speech more than to elevated and tragic. Euripides uses it in this way four other times, always with a tone of hostility between two mortals. Sophocles, on the other hand, uses it twice as an authoritative address by gods to mortals.¹⁰⁸ Here, the word neatly balances the current ‘comic’ Heracles, drunk and uninformed of the situation; and the Heracles the audience knows must appear at the end to confront Thanatos and rescue Alcestis. In the ensuing monologue Heracles acknowledges the inevitability of death while distancing himself from it. He speaks at length about the inevitability of death for all mortals and encourages the slave to accept his mortality and enjoy his life while he can (773-802). Yet he speaks entirely in gnomics, using impersonal third-person statements about mortality; he never explicitly includes himself among those subject to death. Finally, the speech is based on a section of Bacchylides 3 in which Apollo addresses Admetus; so Heracles is literally speaking with words of divine authority.¹⁰⁹ Once again Euripides hints at the tension between Heracles’ current and future natures.

Heracles appears closer to divine in his interactions with Admetus. It is Admetus who first mentions Heracles’ divine father (509) and in the following dialogue both men are concerned about Heracles being in a house experiencing death. As Apollo must leave the house for fear of death’s *miasma* (22), Heracles declares that it would be shameful (*αἰσχρὸν*, 542) for guests to stay; Admetus places verbal emphasis on the separation between Heracles and the funeral: “The guest quarters are separate... guest quarters away from the house... close the door well” (*χωρὶς ξενῶνές εἰσιν... δωμάτων ἐξωπίους / ξενῶνας... εὖ δὲ κλήσατε / θύρας*, 543-49).

¹⁰⁸ Eur. *Or.* 1567; *Hel.* 1186; *Hec* 1127, 1280; *Soph. Aj.* 71, 89; *OC* 1627 (Parker 2007, 205).

¹⁰⁹ Bacchyl. 3.78-84, noted in Garner 1988, 68-70.

Both men recognize the importance of keeping Heracles away from the rituals of death. As he is deceived about the dead woman's identity, he is emotionally as well as physically distant from the reality of Alcestis' death. Misunderstanding the situation, he minimizes the grief of the household, offers little in the way of comfort, and carries on with discordant revelry. Unlike Apollo, however, he has no fear of *miasma*. While he stays well away from the mourning in a closed-off wing of the house, he does not have to leave entirely. The divine ban from mortal death is a much stronger force (Buxton 1987, 212). While the necessity of separation continues the parallel between Heracles and Apollo and nods to Heracles' coming divinity, it is incomplete. This fact allows the resolution that Apollo, driven from the house, cannot provide.

Heracles, as the 'second Apollo' of *Alcestis*, confronts Thanatos and succeeds where Apollo himself failed. He is able to accomplish his rescue because he is in between god and man, and because he is traditionally a liminal figure with the ability to cross into the underworld (Thorburn 2002, 68; Lush 2012, 390-91). The scene is not enacted onstage, so his monologue beforehand and comments to Admetus afterward provide the details of the struggle (837-60, 1026-33, 1140-42). When he first plans to rescue Alcestis, Heracles nods to his divine lineage as the source of his ability: "show now what sort of a son the Tirythian Alcmene daughter of Elektryon bore to Zeus (νῦν δεῖξον οἶον παῖδά σ' ἢ Τιρυνηθία / ἐγείνατ' Ἡλεκτρύωνος Ἀλκμήνη Δί, 838-39). Again as he prepares to reveal her identity to Admetus, he tells his host "you will say in the future that the son of Zeus is a noble guest" (καὶ τὸν Διὸς / φήσεις ποτ' εἶναι παῖδα γενναῖον ξένον, 1119-20). But another son of Zeus, also a noble guest, has already confronted Thanatos without success. The actual achievement of Alcestis' rescue belongs to mortal action. Heracles fights Thanatos with physical force, as Apollo will not. Thanatos is unwilling to listen to reason or persuasion in his encounter with Apollo, but his stubborn resolve is matched by that

of Heracles (Castellani 1979, 489ff.). Thanatos has no regard for the concern of mortals; Heracles has none for the laws of the gods that keep them from interfering with one another.¹¹⁰ Heracles is the only one who can rescue Alcestis so completely. He has the power and access to the underworld that Admetus can only wish for, and a freedom to approach the dead and disrupt divine plans that Apollo lacks.

Heracles overpowers Thanatos with physical strength expressed in particularly mortal metaphors. He styles himself as an epinician athlete, a participant in Homeric funeral games, and a warrior in battle.¹¹¹ He plans to defeat Thanatos as a wrestler, “throwing a loop around him with my arms” (κύκλον γε περιβαλὼν χεροῖν ἔμαῖν, 847) and tells Admetus that he won the woman at “contests... worthy of labor for athletes” (ἀγῶνα... ἀθληταῖσιν ἄξιον πόνον, 1026-27). After the revelation he explains that he won her by “engaging in battle” and “grabbing him with my hands” (μάχην συνάψας... μάρψας χεροῖν, 1140-42). The manner of Heracles’ rescue and the language with which he describes it emphasize the humanity of his solution. And while physical contests are not a typical mode of religious interaction between mortals and gods, Heracles implies a religious context for his fight. Athletic contests in contemporary Greece were held as religious festivals accompanied by great sacrifices. In heroic myth, they were often funeral games to honor heroes killed in battle, again combined with other religious rites (Parker 2007, 255-56). The particular reference to funeral games is especially fitting, as these contests are a

¹¹⁰ Artemis states this ban explicitly to Hippolytus: “The law is like this for the gods: none is willing to oppose the plan of one who wants it, but we always stand aside” (οὐδεὶς ἀπαντᾶν βούλεται προθυμῆ τῆ τοῦ θέλοντος, ἀλλ’ ἀφιστάμεσθ’ αἰεί, *Hipp.* 1328). Thanatos’ legal language hints at this arrangement as well; he argues that Apollo should not infringe on his rights (Parker 2007, 59).

¹¹¹ The invented games parallel Patroclus’ funeral games, and Heracles’ final speech borrows from epinician (Garner 1988, 66-67). Parker notes Heracles’ heroic tone and formal speech beginning in 837, in contrast to his former, more comic language (2007, 218).

mortal response to the inevitability of death, here transformed into a means of escape from death. The religious implications of Heracles' victory over Thanatos continue the themes of divinization and immortality. Athletes honored in epinician enjoy quasi-divine status in their songs; dead heroes receive honor beyond death from the games held at their funeral; and heroes in battle hope to earn κλέος ἄφθιτον to last long after their death. Heracles, in overcoming Thanatos in physical contest, earns a reversal of death – not immortality, but a reprieve from mortality – for Alcestis. He also proves his own power beyond mortal ability and anticipates his role in future *katabases*, including his own eventual return from death and elevation to divinity (Lush 2012, 390-91).

Upon his return from Alcestis' grave, the victorious Heracles acts with something closer to divine authority than before. He remains at stage level rather than *ex machina* and addresses Admetus as a friend, but like the epilogue gods he possesses superior knowledge of the full situation, urges Admetus to obey him, and finally explains everything (1101-10). Both men refer to his divine lineage (1119-20, 1136) and Admetus defers to Heracles' authority and power: “master, you are forcing me” (ἄναξ, βιάζει μ', 1116). Heracles is still a long way from a *deus ex machina*. Admetus does not accept his command instantly and happily as those addressed by an epilogue god. He argues and is forced to comply reluctantly and with great objection; but comply he does. On the other hand, Heracles offers no consolation or commemorative cult, but instead restores the lost Alcestis completely. None of Euripides' epilogue gods offer such a complete resolution.

Two gnomic statements from the chorus also suggest to the audience, who know that Alcestis is alive and that Heracles will be a god, the idea that Heracles intervenes in a god-like way. First, after Admetus refuses the prize woman Heracles gives him, they tell Admetus that he

“must bear the gift of a god” (χρή δ’... καρτερεῖν θεοῦ δόσιν, 1071). Ostensibly they mean this as a trite consolation to Admetus for the loss of his wife. Parker rejects the ambiguity that Dale sees in this statement, that the chorus could be referring to the woman as δόσιν (2007, 264; 1954, 125). I agree that the chorus intends nothing more than a common platitude, but the potential for irony from the audience’s perspective is undeniable, and extends to θεοῦ as well as δόσιν. Knowing who the woman is, and who Heracles will be, the audience can appreciate the chorus’ accidental assertion that Admetus must “bear” this gift too.¹¹² And the god, while easy to understand nebulously as personified Fate or Necessity, can imply a second meaning in the future divinity of Heracles. Finally, in the closing lines the chorus gives a coda that appears verbatim in several later Euripidean tragedies.¹¹³ The chorus says “there are many forms of the divinities; the gods work many things unexpectedly... a god finds a way for unexpected things (πολλὰ μορφαὶ τῶν δαιμονίων, πολλὰ δ’ ἀέλπτως κραίνουσι θεοί... τῶν δ’ ἀδοκίτων πόρον ἦρε θεός, 1159-62). Again, this statement is primarily gnomic, with generalized significance to the plot; it would be overzealous to pin major points of interpretation on it.¹¹⁴ But the coda follows a closing scene in which a mortal son of Zeus brings about an unexpected resolution, and attains some level of the divine power he will later possess by right. The chorus reveals no secret meaning here, but their final words encourage the audience to appreciate Heracles’ ability to accomplish the unbelievable, and perhaps linger on the question of his mortality and divinity.

¹¹² Parker points to καρτερεῖν as evidence against the suggestion that the line is ambiguous, as a prize-woman is not something to be endured (2007, 263-64). However, the discordance of this word adds to the irony, rather than ruling it out. The chorus is unaware of the truth of the situation, and so the platitude they use is unsuited to the reality.

¹¹³ Identical final lines appear in *Andromache*, *Helen*, *Bacchae*, and slightly changed in *Medea*.

¹¹⁴ Parker 2007, 284; Roberts 1987, 56-57; Lefkowitz 2016, 197

In a tragedy with several figures exploring the intermediate areas between death and life, mortality and immortality, Heracles stands out not so much because of his intermediacy but because of his successful use of it. Apollo is forced into a mortal role, and then forced away from it; he intervenes in the process of death, but only exchanges one death for another. Admetus and Alcestis both willingly participate in the exchange of deaths, but find themselves stuck in between, both alive and dead simultaneously.¹¹⁵ They achieve something beyond mere mortality but fall short of divinity; the reality of death remains. Heracles, on the other hand, is already in the audience's minds a god-to-be. Though the characters onstage are unaware of this, they defer to his divine lineage and his physical power. And Heracles, though aware of his own mortality, moves comfortably and confidently into the space between life and death in his encounter with Thanatos, and emerges successful. He uses both his mortal advantages and his semi-divine strength, thereby overpowering a god in a wrestling match and mixing persuasion of a friend with some of the authority of an epilogue god.

The power of Heracles' intermediacy is reinforced by parallels with and references to other similarly liminal figures. The chorus believes that only Asclepius could now save Alcestis, were he not dead himself (121-27).¹¹⁶ They reveal what Apollo leaves out on the prologue (though the audience would already be familiar with the story), that the son of Apollo was killed for restoring the dead to life. Like Heracles will, he used his role as half-man, half-god to

¹¹⁵ Luschnig 1992, 24 and 59; Conacher 1968, 21

¹¹⁶ There is some disagreement on the form of *μόνος* in 121, as the received text begins with Asclepius suggested as the subject (*μόνος*, 121) but, after an interjected protasis, the main clause has Alcestis as the subject (*προλιποῦσ'*, 124). Parker leaves the text as problematic but emphasizes that *μόνος* must be taken as referring to Asclepius and not changed to *μόνα* to modify Alcestis, as the chorus clearly intends to single out Asclepius as the only one able to save Alcestis (2007, 80-81).

mediate between the two worlds and combat death's inevitability. Similarly, he is known by the audience as a future divinity; in the 5th century BCE Asclepius' sanctuaries were places of healing for the very sick.¹¹⁷ The chorus also alludes to, and Admetus likewise names, Orpheus as one with the power to restore the dead to life (968-69, 357-62). Like Heracles and Asclepius, his father is a god; but he is never divinized. He is less successful in restoring the dead to life, but still strongly associated with it. He is honored in cult practices as the giver of special knowledge on death and the underworld, not the power to escape or reverse death but to mitigate its oblivion. Like other ritual responses to death, Orphic cult provides mortals some limited control over their death. Finally, Heracles also parallels Thanatos. He, too, is in between the mortals and gods, life and death. He mediates between them by bringing souls from their bodies to the gods of the underworld, as the others mediate by restoring them. Hateful to both gods and men, he belongs with neither. In this sense he is the opposite of the semi-divine heroes above; rather than belonging partially to both worlds, he is in between without belonging. But without the mortality of the figures above, Thanatos lacks any sympathy for mortals and uses his intermediacy to facilitate inevitable death, rather than trying to reverse it as the others do.

These several parallels between Heracles and others contrast the partial or total failure of other restorations from death with the successful and complete return of Alcestis by Heracles. After all, Asclepius is killed for his actions and Eurydice does not escape the underworld with Orpheus. To some, the parallels suggest that perhaps Heracles was less successful than he seems

¹¹⁷ Honors for Asclepius followed the same pattern as those for Heracles: he was honored in earlier centuries as a dead hero, and over time his cult spread and grew in popularity until eventually he was considered a god. Speculatively, as Asclepius was a fairly new god to the contemporary audience, the comparison between him and Heracles might have drawn more attention to Heracles' future divinity.

at the play's conclusion. They argue that Alcestis' return means that Admetus must die as originally planned; or more often, that Admetus fails a test of loyalty by accepting her before he knows her identity.¹¹⁸ Such interpretations can be explained by a reluctance to admit happy endings in a tragedy, a misunderstanding of the genre's limitations; or a desire to see Admetus punished for what they see as a lack of virtue; or an expectation that Euripides will put divine justice in a negative light. But it is important to remember that neither Asclepius nor Orpheus completely fails to reverse death, and both go on to help humans mitigate their mortality. A more natural conclusion is that Heracles stands apart from his parallels by his completely successful rescue of Alcestis. The two-part structure of the play encourages the audience to see the play's second half as a reversal of the first, life and rejoicing in contrast with death and mourning, as spelled out by the slave (760). He likewise stands in contrast with the other examples of mortals trying to reverse death. Lush argues that in a narrative sense these parallels are 'imagined alternatives' that create a sense of suspense despite Apollo's declaration that Alcestis will be rescued (2012, 392-6). The references to failed rescue do not imply Heracles' failure as well, but set his act apart as outstanding, an unexpected (though foretold) success.

Beyond his place in between mortal and god, life and death, Heracles is a liminal figure in the theater itself. He belongs in the worlds of comedy and satyr as much as in tragedy; hence the argument for *Alcestis* as prosatyr or tragicomedy. Much like *Alcestis*, Heracles himself is "a double tune" (δίσσα... μέλη, 760) in between extremes in all aspects of life.¹¹⁹ He takes in stride

¹¹⁸ On the undoing of Admetus' rescue, see Gregory 1991, 43. On Admetus betraying Alcestis in the final scene, see Smith 1968, 39-44; Scodel 1979, 56; Goldfarb 1992, 123; Dyson 1988, 23.

¹¹⁹ The slave is describing the combination of Heracles' drunken singing and the lamentation in the house as a double tune. The line encompasses the dissonance of the play's two halves, as well as the nature of Heracles himself.

a sudden change from comic to tragic; shifts from mortal vulnerability to death, to confident victory over Thanatos; mixes human friendship with divine authority; and moves with ease in and out of a space on the brink of Hades. He is the essential liminal figure, and because of this he is able to restore life and joy in the place of death and mourning, and prefigure his own future journey from life to death, and back from death to immortality.

Conclusion

While it does reach a happy ending, *Alcestis* is far from a light or comic play. It is an exploration of how people respond to the reality of death, and their own status regarding divinity and mortality. Euripides shows each individual using their position and the actions available to them in order to take whatever control they can of the situation. The mortals are limited in what they can do against necessity and death, but they are not powerless. Through their worship of and relationships with the gods they ask for relief from death. With Apollo's help, Admetus is granted it. They also use religious ritual to extend the life of Alcestis beyond her actual death: she, by appointing Hestia as her successor in the home; Admetus and the chorus, by promising her cult honors and songs that preserve her name, image, and excellence, and even suggest her divinity. None of these actions accomplishes what they would like, which is to prevent or reverse her death. They lack the necessary status and power. However, they are able to mitigate the totality of death. In doing so, they elevate Alcestis to a place nearer to divinity than she possessed during life, and consider her to be in between life and death, rather than completely dead. Likewise Admetus and his household themselves move out of ordinary mortal status into a place between life and death. Their actions, however limited, have a noticeable effect on their state of being.

The more drastic changes in status come from those with some level of divine authority: Apollo and Heracles, with references to Asclepius and Orpheus as well. Apollo is able to save Admetus from his fated death because of his divinity. His involvement, however, is a result of his temporary servitude disguised as a mortal. While in a state in between mortality and divinity, he intervenes and saves Admetus; but he does so at the cost of Alcestis' life, and as he leaves his mortal disguise behind and returns to Olympus he does not resolve the family's continuing crisis. In contrast, Heracles is a mortal who will in the future attain immortality. But though still mortal, he enjoys the strength and status that comes from his divine father Zeus, and is known to the audience as a hero with the ability to cross the boundary into Hades and return again. Unlike the other mortals in the play, he is able to reverse death completely rather than simply reduce its completeness; unlike Apollo, his intervention requires no further death and is not ended by the limitations put on gods to avoid *miasma* and not interfere with one another. Like Asclepius and Orpheus before him, Heracles occupies a special place outside of the normal confines of mortality and divinity; and his own capacity to move between these worlds and eventually transform from mortal into god provides him the ability to change the status of others as well. He returns Alcestis from death to life and moves the household of Admetus out of the living death of perpetual mourning, back into the world of the living. His actions are exceptional, because his status is exceptional. But in a broad sense he is like every other character in *Alcestis*, acting within the same system of religious actions and status.

Chapter 3: Ritual Authority and Invention in *Iphigenia in Tauris*

Like *Alcestis*, the mortal protagonists in *Iphigenia in Tauris* use the rituals and status available to them to respond to their circumstances and turn things to their advantage. These circumstances are, again like *Alcestis*, a result of prior encounters with the gods. The effects on Orestes and Iphigenia in *Iphigenia in Tauris* (*IT*) lead to more formal, lasting shifts in status. Iphigenia is removed from her community and established as a priestess with ritual authority and close association with Artemis. Orestes is marginalized by his pollution but also closely associated with Apollo, treated as equal in status to the Furies, marked as a sacred offering to Artemis, and mistaken for a divinity himself. Both Iphigenia and Orestes take advantage of their elevated status in ritual behavior, threatening pollution to acquire what they need and even inventing rites to finally escape Tauris. The play's complex interaction between divine and mortal efforts relies on points of ritual contact between the two groups. The divine influence on the situation is undeniable: because of Artemis' demand at Aulis and subsequent intervention, Iphigenia is trapped in a remote place as a priestess presiding over human sacrifices. Because of Apollo's oracle, Orestes is an outcast fleeing from the Furies, arriving at the same remote place to remove the cult image of Artemis. Despite the overt interference of these gods on the situation, however, neither of them appears onstage or seems to intervene in any way during the tragedy. Iphigenia and Orestes bring about their escape through their own efforts, uncertain about the intent of their patron gods, and whether they will receive any help in escaping their dire situation.

Because of their circumstances and their prior interactions with the gods, both Iphigenia and Orestes are at the margins of their world and in between states of life. This fact is embodied in the geographical and cultural setting in a remote barbarian land; the siblings are physically

separated from their normal life, family, and community. Their inability to complete their transitions to adulthood through marriage and household headship likewise keeps them suspended outside of normal life progression. Iphigenia's role as priestess and Orestes' *miasma* extend their marginalization to their religious experience as well, and paradoxical comments throughout the play refer to them as both existing and not. The very marginality that removes them from normal life, however, also brings them closer to the divine, and they possess religious authority that allows them to affect their own circumstances and divine plans. The central event of the play, the siblings' escape from the temple, is achieved thanks to religious roles and rituals, depending on the quasi-divine status of Iphigenia as priestess and the divinely-negotiated *miasma* of Orestes. The ritual events of the play further change the roles of Iphigenia and Orestes, and in the end Athena acknowledges these shifts by establishing new cult practices. Iphigenia becomes perpetually quasi-divine as part of the cult of Artemis at Brauron, and Orestes' pollution and near-sacrifice are memorialized in a mock human sacrifice at Halai.

Although in its backstory and its resolution the plot is evidently controlled by divine forces, it is equally clear in the body of the play that the gods are affected by the religious roles and actions of mortals and other gods. They are participants in the religious system and subject to its rules, rather than external forces overseeing it and acting upon others without consequence to themselves. This is seen especially in the concern about Orestes' *miasma* and contact with both Artemis and Apollo, and in the physical and ontological effects of Iphigenia's invented ritual on the cult image of Artemis. Her rescue is mandated by Apollo but carried out beginning to end by mortal ritual. Finally, the questions and doubts about the nature and goodness of Artemis and Apollo suggests the possibility that the gods' nature and their ritual interactions with human communities are, partly or completely, formed by mortal rather than divine wishes. In the

end *IT* does not deny the power of the gods or elevate mortal power above divine, but it does suggest a more complex interplay between these two groups through their ritual interactions. Mortals, especially those in unusual circumstances, possess some religious authority that enables them to influence the gods they interact with. The actions of mortals in *IT* and their effects demonstrate the flexibility of the broader ritual system in Euripidean religion, facilitating interactions between gods and mortals.

Critical Considerations: Plot, Aetiologies and Divine Will

IT begins with a prologue by Iphigenia, in which she explains how she is sacrificed at Aulis, replaced with a deer by Artemis without the Greeks' knowledge, and transported to Tauris. There she is now priestess of Artemis, assisting in the human sacrifice of foreigners. She relates a dream in which her family's palace collapses, and she prepares for sacrifice a fair-haired column she believes to signify her brother Orestes. She interprets the dream to mean her brother is dead. A second prologue follows, in which a still-living Orestes and his companion Pylades arrive at Tauris. He has been sent by Apollo to steal the cult image of Artemis and bring it to Athens, thereby freeing himself from the pursuit of the Furies due to his murder of Clytemnestra. The two men are captured by Taurians and brought to Iphigenia to be sacrificed. As neither Orestes nor Iphigenia reveals their name and each believes the other to be dead, the priestess nearly sacrifices her brother. However, she asks Pylades to bring a letter to his family and in reciting its contents to him, she reveals her identity and the recognition is accomplished. The siblings plot their escape by claiming that the two prisoners and the cult statue all need to be purified from the pollution of matricide. Iphigenia brings them all to the shore and demands secrecy for the rites of purification. The Taurians are deceived at first but discover the prisoners

as they are boarding. A wind drives the ship back to shore and the Taurian king Thoas plans a pursuit. Athena appears above the stage to resolve the crisis, ordering Thoas to let them go and establishing cult observances for Artemis and Iphigenia.

The plot is, among extant texts, a novelty in the stories of both Iphigenia and Orestes. Artemis demands the sacrifice of Agamemnon's oldest daughter before allowing his ships to sail for Troy; this much is a well-established part of tragic and epic traditions, though not Homeric.¹²⁰ Her rescue of Iphigenia and even her removal to Tauris have some possible precedents, though in these the girl is made immortal. There is no prior extant version in which Iphigenia is saved but remains mortal, and the rescue is unattested in earlier tragedies.¹²¹ Likewise, Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra and pursuit by the Furies are well-known from both Homer and Aeschylus, but the failure of the trial at Athens appears to be an invention and there is no reliable prior link between Orestes and Tauris or the rescue of Iphigenia.¹²² Hulton notes

¹²⁰ The sacrifice at Aulis is told in Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* and the *Cypria*, as well as numerous Attic tragedies including Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Electra*. Iphigenia is not mentioned in Homer. Some attempt to read Agamemnon's accusations against Calchas for poor advice as a reference to her sacrifice (*Il.* 1.106-8), and others suggest that the living daughter Iphianassa is the same one and Homer does not know the story of Aulis (*Il.* 9.145, 287). However, the former is far too vague to be a convincing allusion, and both *Cypria* and Sophocles' *Electra* distinguish between Iphianassa and Iphigenia (Cropp 2000, 43; Kyriakou 2006, 20).

¹²¹ The *Catalogue* has Artemis substitute a likeness of Iphigenia for the sacrifice and establish the girl as Artemis Einodia (Hes. Fr. 23a). Stesichorus repeats this, with a possible change from Artemis Einodia to Hecate (Stes. Fr. 215). Proclus' summary of *Cypria* includes the deer as substitute and Tauris as Iphigenia's location after her rescue, though here too she is made immortal (*Cypria*, Proclus in Davies 1988, 32). There is some doubt as to the authenticity of the *Cypria* version (Hollinshead 1985, 422). Herodotus mentions Iphigenia as the recipient of human sacrifices at Tauris, but does not refer to her sacrifice, her rescue, or her actual presence there (Hdt. 4.103). See Cropp 2000, 43-44 and Ekroth 2003, 95-96.

¹²² O'Brien 1988, 98. Homer relates Orestes' matricide in revenge for Agamemnon's death, but not his pursuit by the Furies or the trial at Athens (*Od.* 1.40-41, 3.196-98, 307-10). The primary source for the events following Clytemnestra's death is Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. There are two possible precedents in Sophocles for elements of *IT*, but neither is well-attested (Cropp 2000, 45; Kyriakou 2006, 20). His *Iphigenia* may include Iphigenia's rescue to Tauris, and *Chryses* may involve Thoas pursuing Iphigenia and Orestes. The sources for both are from later summaries and considered unreliable (Cropp 2000, 45 n.50).

that the changes to the established myth are unusually central to the plot of *IT* (1962, 364). The plot diverges significantly from other versions of the family's story, not just in some particulars but in its very setup and its outcome. In a general sense, this illustrates the broad license tragedians have to manipulate mythology for their own purposes. More particularly, it suggests that Euripides constructs the plot of *IT* exactly as he wants it.

One relevant direction of scholarship on *IT* considers the cult aetiologies at its conclusion and in Orestes' backstory, seeking links to historical cults, noting discrepancies, and speculating about the invention of cults in tragedy.¹²³ Regarding the cult of Artemis at Brauron, many attempts have been made to find physical evidence of cult activity honoring Iphigenia or to find in the known rites of Brauron parallels and links to the play's plot and text. The physical and literary evidence, however, fails to provide any credible links between a Taurian Artemis or Iphigenia and any Greek cult practices or sites.¹²⁴ Similarly, the cult of Artemis Tauropolis at Halai shows no clear evidence of Iphigenia or the bloodletting rite described in *IT*, except from sources thought to be drawing on Euripides rather than reporting historical practice (Hollinshead 1985, 419-40). And although the cult attribution 'Tauropolis' is a convenient link that Euripides exploits in the conclusion of *IT*, this is a false etymology. Artemis Tauropolis evokes the goddess' association with the bull, madness, and likely male sexuality. It appears in numerous cults apart from Halai (Lloyd-Jones 1983a, 96-101). Kyriakou argues convincingly for reading Euripidean aetiologies as inventions and assuming thematic motives for their inclusion (2006, 24-29). They are by nature thematically relevant to this project, as they establish religious

¹²³ Sansone 1975, Dowden 1989, Wolff 1992, Dunn 1996, Goff 1999, Tzanetou 1999-2000, Ekroth 2003

¹²⁴ See Ekroth 2003 for an overview of the evidence and arguments

practices and statuses for the mortal heroes. As such I will consider their relationship to the religious system at work in the body of the tragedy and leave aside the question of historical accuracy with the understanding that there is little evidence for it.

Another area of critical focus has been the role and perception of divine will and fate in the events of *IT*. Both Iphigenia and Orestes express doubts about the authenticity, effectiveness, and concern of their respective patron gods. The tragedy also includes numerous references to the vague forces like *Tyche* and *daimon* as the powers responsible for both favorable and unfavorable events. While δαίμων and θεός are mostly interchangeable in the 5th century, Euripides explicitly distinguishes between them in several texts and he often sets up a contrast between the divine plan and the more nebulous *Tyche*.¹²⁵ These forces, in fact, receive far more of the credit for interfering in mortal affairs than do Apollo or Artemis, who have both intervened directly in the lives of the two heroes. With the exception of Athena's appearance *ex machina* in the concluding scene, no divinities appear. Scholars attempt to balance the clear involvement of gods in the backstory and conclusion of *IT* with the indiscernible role of fate in the body of the play where Iphigenia and Orestes are, or at least seem to be, left to their own devices. At one extreme are readings like that of Lesky, who sees *IT* as a play without religion or gods (1967, 176). Kyriakou and Burnett seek more balanced approaches, with different emphases. The former demonstrates that the mortals rely on their own abilities while acknowledging that divine will asserts itself in the resolution (2006, 15-17). The latter reads *IT* as first and foremost a divine rescue plot, though she notes that the central recognition scene

¹²⁵ For δαίμων and θεός in the 5th century see Kyriakou 2006, 320-21. For Euripides distinguishing between them, Mikalson 1991, 22-29. For the tension between divine agency and *Tyche* see Giannopoulou 1999-2000.

occurs without a god's involvement (1971, 47-49). Both interpretations place too firm a divide between mortal and divine, however, and their opposing perspectives can be brought closer together by Wolff's insight that the whole play is constructed around ritual (1992, 308-9). It is through this ritual underpinning that we can better understand the mortal and divine elements at work in *IT*. The mortals, in their actions at the center of the play, engage in rites that link them to the gods and draw on their divine power. The gods, in their direct involvement before and after the main action, likewise use established ritual practices to influence the mortal world. It is not that one group or the other is the sole or primary force at work; rather, each party uses the ritual means available to them to further their own agendas in a dynamic system.

Divine Use of Ritual

The opening scenes make it clear that Iphigenia and Orestes are in their present circumstances due to the interference of gods in their lives. Iphigenia is brought to Tauris by Artemis after the goddess rescued the girl from being sacrificed to her; Orestes is sent by Apollo's oracle to end the Furies' pursuit and rid himself of the *miasma* incurred by following the god's direction to kill his mother. As Sansone observes, the situation at the play's beginning is manipulated by the gods to achieve the outcome they want (1975, 291). However, this basic summary glosses over the mortal involvement in the events leading to both Orestes' and Iphigenia's present circumstances. In both cases, the gods influence the outcomes of the mortals' situations through familiar rituals: omens, sacrifices, and oracular statements. Although the gods hold significant power over the mortals in both contexts, these are not acts of brute force directing mortal lives. Rather, they are relational events; as Foley puts it, ritual is a means of

communication between mortal and divine (1985, 63). It is, in fact, not merely communication but strategic positioning, negotiation, and exchange.

Iphigenia begins her explanation of her situation by identifying three individuals responsible for her apparent sacrifice: “for the sake of Helen my father sacrificed me, it seemed, to Artemis” (ἔσφαξεν Ἑλένης οὐνεχ’, ὡς δοκεῖ, πατήρ / Ἀρτέμιδι, 8-9).¹²⁶ The three figures, named in short succession, each play a different role. Helen is first, the cause of the situation; Agamemnon next, the one who carried it out; Artemis last, the recipient. Euripides places her name prominently as the last named of the three, the culmination of the phrase, and the beginning of a line. The positioning adds emphasis to the role of Artemis. The goddess holds undeniable power in the series of events: she prevents the ships from departing by controlling the wind, and later spirits Iphigenia away to Tauris unbeknownst to the Greeks. These are actions far beyond mortal capability to replicate or resist. Nevertheless, her actions also depend on proper religious actions on the part of the mortals, in which both she and the mortals exercise some level of control.

For Artemis to receive Iphigenia as a sacrifice, a series of ritual interactions has to occur between her and the Greeks. First, Agamemnon makes a vow to her (20-21); then he uses a burnt offering to determine the cause of the adverse winds, and Calchas interprets it (16); finally, they carry out the sacrifice itself (26-27). None of these actions is forced. In the case of the vow, there is no indication that it was demanded or even suggested by Artemis or any other god.¹²⁷ The

¹²⁶ Greek text is from Cropp 2000 unless otherwise specified. Translations are my own.

¹²⁷ The vow is likely original to Euripides (Cropp 2000, 173). In other versions the sacrifice is demanded for a previous offense against Artemis. The ‘foolish vow’ motif transforms an episode of divine wrath into a positive ritual interaction gone awry.

burnt offering and the sacrifice of Iphigenia are more strongly motivated by Artemis' control of the winds, but still the men are active participants.¹²⁸ Even this brief sketch of the events at Aulis illustrates an interactive system of gods and mortals at work. Iphigenia seems to recognize this shared responsibility. She reflects several times on her father in the act of killing her and expresses animosity towards other Greeks implicated in the sacrifice: Calchas, Odysseus, Menelaus, and Helen.¹²⁹

Following the sacrifice at Aulis, Artemis takes more direct action regarding Iphigenia, putting a deer in her place and transporting the girl to Tauris:

ἀλλ' ἐξέκλεψέ μ' ἔλαφον ἀντιδοῦσά μου
 Ἄρτεμις Ἀχαιοῖς· διὰ δὲ λαμπρὸν αἰθέρα
 πέμψασά μ' ἐς τήνδ' ὤικισεν Ταύρων χθόνα...
 ναοῖσι δ' ἐν τοῖσδ' ἱερέαν τίθησί με·

(28-30, 34)

But Artemis stole me from the Greeks, substituting a deer in my place; she sent me through the bright ether and settled me in this Taurian land... she appointed me priestess in this temple.

Once again, Artemis takes a prominent position at the beginning of a line; this time, though, she is the subject and the only one responsible.¹³⁰ Her ritual interactions with the Greeks conclude with the substitution of the deer. Artemis now begins her interactions with the girl herself, more

¹²⁸ As to the question of whether Calchas misinterpreted the burnt offering and Artemis did not desire the sacrifice, there is no indication of such a possibility in the text. Iphigenia expresses doubts about Artemis' role in the Taurian rites, but never about the events at Aulis. Neither does she exclude the possibility, but any such line of thinking is purely speculative. In contrast, some scholars argue that in Aeschylus' version Artemis does not desire the sacrifice at Aulis. For a brief summary of this discussion see Lloyd-Jones 1983a, 87-88.

¹²⁹ Agamemnon in 211, 361-65, 853-54, 1082-83; Helen and Menelaus 355-58; Helen 523-25; Calchas 531-33; Odysseus 24-25, 533-35

¹³⁰ When Iphigenia recounts the events at Aulis to Orestes she repeats the prominent placement of Artemis, and repeats ἔλαφον ἀντιδοῦσα and ἐς τήνδε ὤικισεν': "tell him that the goddess Artemis saved me, putting a deer in my place... and settled me in this land" (λέγ' οὐνεκ' ἔλαφον ἀντιδοῦσά μου θεὰ / Ἄρτεμις ἔσωσέ μ'... / ἐς τήνδε δ' ὤικισ' αἴαν, 783-84, 786).

intimate than those with Agamemnon and Calchas but nevertheless still guided by ritual observances. Iphigenia belongs to the goddess as her sacrificial victim. Her journey to Tauris through the divine space of the *aether* illustrates the shift in her identity because of the sacrifice. Once at Tauris, Iphigenia continues her ritual contact with Artemis in a more permanent fashion as her priestess. She ministers to the goddess, prepares her sacrifices, and lives in her sanctuary. Through human sacrifice Iphigenia becomes the possession of Artemis; through human sacrifice she continues to serve her. She facilitates ritual contact for others as well, serving as an intermediary between the Taurians and their goddess.¹³¹

In contrast to Iphigenia's first interactions with Artemis as an object of others' ritual, Orestes is actively involved with Apollo's plans from the beginning of his story. He receives direction from the god's oracle to kill his mother, and complies (714-15); pursued by Furies, he seeks out the god's help and stands trial before Athena (941-44, 961-67); when some of the Furies refuse to leave him be after the verdict, he consults Apollo once more and at the oracle's command sets out for Tauris (970-78). These encounters are mediated through the Delphic oracle. As Agamemnon and Calchas turn to ritual to learn the cause of the adverse wind and then act based on the results, Orestes asks the oracle and follows the declarations of Apollo. He emphasizes his own cooperation with the oracle: "I gave my all to him and obeyed his words" (πάντ' ἐγὼ δοῦς τὰμὰ καὶ πεισθεὶς λόγοις, 714). Although Orestes believes he is doomed to die and the oracle has failed him, he recognizes that his interaction with Apollo depends on his response as well as the god's declarations.

¹³¹ For Iphigenia's close identification with the goddess see Hamilton 1985, 59-61. See also Connelly 2007, 217ff. on the authority of priestesses in their larger communities.

At times Orestes sees himself as a victim of Apollo's actions. But even as he feels that he has lost his agency, he recognizes his own part in reaching his current situation. In his first speech he accuses both Apollo and the Furies:

ποῖ μ' αὖ τήνδ' ἐς ἄρκυν ἤγαγες...
 ...διαδοχαῖς δ' Ἐρινύων
 ἠλαυνόμεσθα φηγάδες ἔξεδροι χθονός. (77, 79-80)

Where have you driven me into this net... we were driven as fugitive from home by the Erinyes' frequent attacks.

Later, he tells Iphigenia that the Furies “fastened a bloody bridle on [him]” (αἱματηρὰ στόμι' ἐπεμβαλεῖν ἐμοί, 935). These declarations not only place the blame for Orestes' circumstances on the gods, they also imply helplessness on his part. Trapped in a net or held in a harness, he has no choice but to fulfill the will of Apollo, or previously the Furies. Nevertheless, he recognizes his own role in cooperation with the god, paradoxically calling himself “both willing and unwilling” (οὐχ ἐκὼν ἐκὼν, 512). Orestes furthermore accuses Apollo of deception, saying that the god “deceived [him], though he is a seer, and devised a trick” (μάντις ὃν ἐψεύσατο / τέχνην δὲ θέμενος, 711-12) and assuring Iphigenia that “the gods, though called wise, are no less deceptive than winged dreams” (οὐδ' οἱ σοφοί γε δαίμονες κεκλημένοι / πτηνῶν ὀνείρων εἰσὶν ἄψευδέστεροι, 570-71). His accusations that he was misled by the god suggest an imbalance of power in these exchanges, but they also affirm their interactive nature. Deception implies an expectation of two-way communication and negotiation, albeit an unfair one.

By the end of the play it will become clear that Orestes' mistrust of Apollo's oracle is unjustified; the god's instructions facilitate not only his release from the Furies but also his reunion with Iphigenia. But again, it is not entirely or even mostly divine action that brings these things about. In his more optimistic moments, Orestes recognizes the balance between Apollo's

plan and his own efforts. He exhorts Iphigenia to “help with the rescue which (Apollo) set out for us” (ἦνπερ ἡμῖν ὄρισεν σωτηρίαν / σύμπραξον, 979-80). The god gives no specific instructions on how to accomplish his command, simply telling Orestes to get the statue “by some trickery or chance” (ἢ τέχναισιν ἢ τύχῃ τινι, 89) and promising no specific resolution for him: “nothing was spoken about matters afterward” (τὸ δ’ ἐνθένδ’ οὐδὲν ἐρρήθη πέρα, 91). Consequently, Orestes asks and wonders what he ought to do, how to go about obeying the oracle, and whether he can succeed (94-103, 985-86, 1028). Apollo is not controlling the action through his oracle; in fact, he leaves a great deal of uncertainty and freedom to Orestes. The mortal’s decisions underpin the entire plot and the success of the mission Apollo commands.

Nevertheless, Orestes also continues to see the oracle as the means of his salvation; Apollo has rescued him already from the Furies and will release him from further pursuit and help him in his escape from Tauris. He continues to ask for the god’s help (82-83), anticipate the safety promised by the Oracle (980-81), and trust that what Apollo commanded is what ought to be done (1012-15). And while there is no clear intrusion of divine power in the central action of the play, one early scene indicates that Orestes enjoys divine protection. When attacked by the Taurians, the messenger reports, Orestes and Pylades remain unscathed. The messenger emphasizes the improbability of this: “But it was unbelievable; for though countless stones were thrown from our hands, not one managed to strike the goddess’ sacrifices” (ἀλλ’ ἦν ἄπιστον· μυρίων γὰρ ἐκ χερῶν / οὐδεὶς τὰ τῆς θεοῦ θύματ’ ἠτύχει βαλὼν, 328-29).¹³² Though it is never

¹³² Cropp reads this as the messenger mistakenly believing Artemis is preserving her victims for the sacrifice, while the audience is expected to understand that Apollo is protecting them (2000, 197). Euripides never clarifies what god is protecting Orestes and Pylades, and this is likely to be a situation in which both possibilities ought to coexist. Both Artemis and Apollo have an interest in the safety of the men.

made explicit, it seems clear from this episode that Orestes still enjoys divine assistance to some degree in his pursuit of Artemis' image. Athena's appearance at the end to aid in his escape confirms this. He is not a mortal left to fend for himself once the gods have established the scenario; neither is he merely a puppet following divine whims, as he and Iphigenia must devise their own escape. Each party, divine and mortal, contributes to the plot as it develops, using whatever means and abilities they have.

Ritual and Marginality

In keeping with the 'network' model, these ritual interactions between gods and mortals change the identities of the mortal agents and shift their positions relative to others. The links with gods draw Orestes and Iphigenia closer to their divine contacts; as a corollary they distance them from their mortal relationships. As Orestes and Iphigenia become increasingly involved in relationships with the divine, they find themselves marginalized in a variety of ways. As their status has been influenced by their involvement with the gods, then, the same happens in reverse. Their increased marginalization places them in positions from which they can interact all the more with the gods, which then leads to further changes. The connection between marginalization and closeness to divinity is reminiscent of the concept of the *pharmakos*, who through its marginalization mediates between a community and the gods.¹³³ Both siblings, but especially Iphigenia, go through a series of shifts in their identities with corresponding shifts in their religious interactions, such that by the play's conclusion they are entirely transformed.

¹³³ The *pharmakos* in Greek tragedy has been particularly discussed in the context of Sophocles' Oediplean plays. Treatments of Oedipus as *pharmakos* include Vernant 1988, Griffith 1993, and Foley 1993.

The marginality of both siblings begins with literal distance, their geographical separation from Greece in the remote land of Tauris. From the Athenian perspective they are on the edge of the map. Iphigenia, Orestes, and the chorus all emphasize their isolation far from Greece and the difficulty of the long journey back.¹³⁴ Tauris is not only physically marginal, but culturally as well. Its inhabitants are barbarians, most strikingly because of the human sacrifice they practice; the geographic distance is reflected in the ritual distortion of local practices (Goff 1999, 111). The land is called ‘barbarian’ throughout the play, including by the Taurian’s own king, further emphasizing the siblings’ absence from their home.¹³⁵ Both Orestes and Iphigenia see Tauris as a place that literally and figuratively separates them from their lives and communities, and both see the gods as responsible for this.

Their marginality is social as well; neither of them has successfully completed their transitions into adulthood.¹³⁶ Iphigenia’s sacrifice at Aulis begins as a feigned wedding to Achilles, a point which Iphigenia recalls several times.¹³⁷ She and Orestes highlight elements of her wedding and sacrifice that are ambiguous enough to apply to both: she receives lustral water intended for a ritual bath before the wedding (but is instead lustrated as a victim for sacrifice) and sends a lock of hair (a common dedication by girls about to be married) to her mother for burial (818-21). In place of wedding hymns there is weeping; in place of a marriage-bed, an

¹³⁴ 85, 132-4, 175, 219, 422ff., 480, 889-90

¹³⁵ 31, 94, 179ff., 629, 775, 888, 906, 1112, 1400, 1422. The Taurians are an archetypal barbarian people, the opposite of Greeks in their religious practices, government, economy, technology, and social laws (Cropp 2000, 49).

¹³⁶ On this theme see especially Tzanetou 1999-2000.

¹³⁷ 25, 216, 361-71, 819, 856-60

altar; in place of the groom, Hades (858-61, 369).¹³⁸ Rather than a wedding, Iphigenia finds death; and rather than married life, the position of priestess in Artemis' temple. This role is particularly symbolic of her incomplete transition to womanhood. Artemis is the goddess associated with girls transitioning from childhood to marriage and adulthood, and Cole speculates that the girls serving Artemis as *arktoi* at Brauron act as pseudo-sacrificial victims in their transitional rites (1984, 241-42).¹³⁹ Dowden reads Iphigenia as the 'prototype maiden' symbolizing this transition to womanhood (1989, 43-44). But unlike everyday maidens preparing for marriage, Iphigenia is not re-integrated into her community following her sacrifice. She remains associated with Artemis, trapped in between maidenhood and adulthood.¹⁴⁰ For a young woman to remain a virgin priestess for her lifetime, rather than serving a term then leaving to marry, was not a typical Greek practice (Parker 1983, 93). Iphigenia is not following a different but culturally acceptable path in life; rather, she is removed from the possibility of a normal life.

The interruption and perversion of her wedding leaves Iphigenia marginalized and isolated. As priestess of Artemis at Tauris she misses all the aspects of life as a woman that she would have taken up upon her marriage:

ἄγαμος ἄτεκνος ἄπολις ἄφιλος,
 ἄ μναστευθεῖς' ἐξ Ἑλλάνων,
 οὐ τὰν Ἄργει μέλπους' Ἴφραν
 οὐδ' ἰστοῖς ἐν καλλιφθόγγοις
 κερκίδι Παλλάδος Ἀθίδος εἰκῶ
 <καὶ> Τιτάνων ποικίλλουσ'.

(220-24)

¹³⁸ Armstrong notes that Iphigenia seems to believe up until the moment of sacrifice that she is to be married, and so would be dressed as a bride for the sacrifice. This is a particularly striking contrast, encouraged by the emphasis on her veil in 372-6 (1985, 7-8). For more on the 'perverted wedding' motif in *IT* see Tzanetou 1999-2000, 205-6, and on the theme more broadly in tragedy see Rehm 1994.

¹³⁹ Sourvinou-Inwood 1997 argues for recognizable elements of the Braurionian rites in *IT* (171-75).

¹⁴⁰ Tzanetou 1999-2000, 202-6; Hartigan 1991, 100.

Marriageless, childless, cityless, friendless, I who was courted by Greek men, I do not sing for Hera at Argos now, or craft an image of Attic Pallas and the Titans weaving with the shuttle on my sweet-sounding loom.

The repetitive list of negative adjectives, which comprises an entire line, emphasizes her all-encompassing isolation.¹⁴¹ The chorus echoes her isolation and specifically marriage as an element missing from her life in Tauris. They are “longing for the gatherings of the Greeks, longing for birth-bringing Artemis” (ποθοῦσ’ Ἑλλάνων ἀγόρους, / ποθοῦσ’ Ἄρτεμιν λοχίαν, 1096-97). Artemis should bring them to childbirth and integration in their community; instead, she keeps them isolated and unmarried on this remote island.

Young men in Greece made their transition to adulthood as ephebes, though evidence for the specifics of their rituals in the 5th century is sparse.¹⁴² Zeitlin reads Orestes’ return to Mycenae, matricide, and flight from the Furies in Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi* as a failed attempt at ephebic initiation; his acquittal in *Eumenides* sets things right and politically re-integrates him (1978, 149-84). In *IT*, however, Euripides makes this resolution into a second failure and sets Orestes on a new ephebic quest in hopes of a more successful re-integration (Tzanetou 209-10). His inability to completely transition into adulthood is symbolized not by a lack of marriage, as with Iphigenia, but by his exile and especially the fact that he is not ruling his house and city. Pursued by the Furies, he has left his home in the charge of Menelaus (927-31). As long as he is afflicted he remains suspended as a youth, waiting to assume his role as man and king.

¹⁴¹ Repeated adjectives are used frequently by Euripides, though only here in a group of four (Cropp 2000, 189). The figure is most typically a tricolon (Kyriakou 2006, 103). The fourth adjective brings the expression added force.

¹⁴² For an overview of the attested rites see Vidal-Naquet 1986, 126-44

Like Alcestis in her play, the ways in which Iphigenia and Orestes interact ritually with the gods even creates uncertainty about whether they are alive or dead. Sansone suggests that Tauris itself should be perceived as Hades, since Iphigenia goes there following her (perceived) death (1978, 38).¹⁴³ Iphigenia is believed dead and seems to even consider herself to be: “people believe I am lying slain” (δοκήμασι / κείμαι σφαχθεῖς, 177-78); “she who was slain, Iphigenia, is living, though to them not living” (ἡ ’ν Αὐλίδι σφαγεῖς’ ... / ζῶσ’ Ιφιγένεια, τοῖς ἐκεῖ δ’ οὐ ζῶσ’ ἔτι, 770-71); “and I hold you, the one who died, as it seemed” (κἀγὼ σὲ τὴν θανοῦσαν, ὡς δοξάζεται, 831). Although they know when they speak that Iphigenia is alive, both she and Orestes think of her as dead in some sense (Hulton 1962, 365).¹⁴⁴ In fact, she would be considered ritually dead because she has been mourned; the Greeks had special rites to re-integrate people who had been presumed dead and mistakenly mourned (Parker 1983, 61). Similarly, Iphigenia believes Orestes dead because of her dream. She has dedicated him in her dream as a sacrifice to Artemis and made libations to his soul in the underworld (56, 170-71). Orestes speaks of himself as living, but “both nowhere and everywhere” (κούδαμοῦ καὶ πανταχοῦ, 568), linking his geographical marginalization to a state of almost non-existence (Sansone 1975, 286). He also declares that “for me it would not be bad... to cease from life” (εἰς ἔμ’ οὐ κακῶς ἔχει... / λήγειν βίου, 691-92) and expects to die presently as a sacrifice to Artemis.

¹⁴³ Likewise Hartigan reads Orestes’ journey to Tauris as a katabasis, or descent to Hades (1991, 95-96).

¹⁴⁴ Hulton believes that Euripides incorporates two separate traditions, that Iphigenia is believed dead by the Greeks and that they know of the deer substitution (1962, 368). He bases his argument on problematic assumptions, including consistency between separate Euripidean tragedies and the likely-spurious messenger speech at the end of *IA*. There is no indication in the text of *IT* that anybody except the gods and the Taurians know that Iphigenia is living.

Finally, the siblings are set apart from the community in the context of religious rituals. Iphigenia becomes associated with Artemis and distanced from her mortal community when she is offered as a sacrificial victim. Now as the goddess' priestess she is even closer to Artemis and farther from other mortals.¹⁴⁵ She lives in the temple, closer to the god than to the community in Tauris. When Orestes tries to embrace her she declares herself to be untouchable: "you are unjustly staining the goddess' attendant, throwing your arms about her untouchable robe" (οὐ δικαίως τῆς θεοῦ τὴν πρόσπολον / χραίνεις, ἀθίκτοις περιβαλὼν πέπλοις χέρας, 798-99). The separation is not absolute, as she willingly embraces her brother once she knows who he is (829). But she clearly considers herself removed from everyday contact because of ritual purity. In the rituals she participates in, too, she is marginalized. She has lost her normal ritual roles, like participation in the festival of Hera and the Panatheneia (220-24, Tzanetou 1999-2000, 206). Instead, she consecrates people about to be sacrificed, ushering them from life into death. Physically she stands at the threshold of Artemis' temple as its key-keeper; ritually, she is at the threshold of Hades.

Orestes' ritual marginality takes rather a different form. He is not placed in a position of ritual control, marginal because of an important role as his sister is. Rather, his *miasma* separates him from normal life for fear of polluting others. So in Athens he is kept apart from other guests met with silence: "they provided me a table for one... and arranged in silence that I was not spoken to (μονοτράπεζά μοι / παρέσχον... / σιγῇ δ' ἔτεκτῆναντ' ἀπρόσφθηνγκτόν μ', 949-51). His isolation, caused by religious observance, leads to a new ritual: "the Athenians have made my poor fortune into a rite" (Ἀθηναίοισι τὰμὰ δυστυχῆ / τελετὴν γενέσθαι, 958-59). This *aition*

¹⁴⁵ Henrichs stresses the ambiguity the roles of victim and priestess bring to Iphigenia (1980, 207-8).

for the Choes festival emphasizes Orestes' isolation from his own community (Goff 1999, 115-16; Sansone 1975, 286). At the same time, even as the Athenians distance him they incorporate and memorialize his *miasma*; again, he both is and is not, paradoxical and marginal (Wolff 1992, 326). At Tauris this marginalization continues. He is found on the shore, a physical margin often associated with supernatural power (Cropp 2000, 58). After his capture, as the intended sacrificial victim for Artemis he takes a place in between life and death parallel to his sister's role as sacrificial priestess. Though Orestes does not die, his entire journey and its culmination in a near-sacrifice can be read as a *katabasis*, displacing him from normal mortal life and transforming him (Hartigan 1991, 95-6).

At times Orestes and Iphigenia shift so far out of the normal range of mortal roles, that they become seen or addressed as quasi-divine. Orestes, together with Pylades, is overtly mistaken for some *daimones* by the herders at the play's opening (267-8). The messenger speech relating their arrival also contains some subtler associations with divinity. Pylades shields him with his cloak, in language drawn from Aphrodite shielding Aeneas in *Iliad* 5.315 (312; Cropp 2000, 196). His fall to the ground is a *πεσήματος* (315), the same word later used as a gloss for the Taurian cult image of Artemis (1384, cf. *πεσεῖν*, 88). The herder also compares Orestes to a hunter (*κυναγός*, 284) just before he slaughters the nearby cattle (298-300), a comparison which seems to link him to the huntress Artemis to whom he is to be sacrificed.¹⁴⁶ And when they are being captured as victims for Artemis, not a single stone strikes them; they are inviolable. The messenger surmises that this is because they are "the goddess' sacrifice" (*τὰ τῆς θεοῦ θύματ'*,

¹⁴⁶ Elsewhere also *κυναγός* has associations with Artemis: Hippolytus is Artemis' hunter (*Hipp.* 1397); the goddess herself is given the title in Sophocles and Aristophanes (*Electra* 563, *Lysistrata* 1270).

329).¹⁴⁷ He does not know that Orestes enjoys Apollo's protection as well, but clearly recognizes divine interference into the situation, calling it "unbelievable" (ἄπιστον, 328). The chorus responds to the huntsman's report with an exclamation: "You have spoken wondrous things of the one who has appeared" (θαυμάστ' ἔλεξας τὸν φανένθ', 340). Cropp notes the association of φανένθ' with heroic and divine epiphanies, another indication that Orestes seems to be more than mortal (2000, 198).¹⁴⁸

This reported event is also full of ritual imagery that foreshadows both the intended sacrifice of Orestes and Pylades to Artemis and the purification rites by which Iphigenia brings about their escape. Orestes slaughters the cattle that are washed in the sea (296-300), Pylades veils him (310-12), and the Taurians bind them both and lead them away (330-35). Sansone argues that these actions complete Orestes' purification and render Iphigenia's later invented rites redundant, even false (1975, 287). However, the context and order of the first scene gives every indication that the rites are polluted and perverted. The cattle are slaughtered in madness, believed by Orestes to be the Furies. The following passage describes his *mania*, emphasizing that the sacrifice has not ended Orestes' possession or his pollution. Pylades veils him after wiping foam from his jaw, again emphasizing his continued impurity; and the Taurians bind him as an offering for human sacrifice, the ultimate perverted ritual. The events are also in reverse order, beginning with sacrifice and ending with binding.¹⁴⁹ The purification led by Iphigenia, in

¹⁴⁷ Iphigenia expresses the same principle when she asks that the prisoners be unbound, as "those who are sacred should not be tied up" (ὡς ὄντες ἱεροὶ μηκέτ' ὄσι δέσμοι, 469).

¹⁴⁸ Some editors amend φανένθ' to μανένθ' but as Cropp argues, with φανένθ' the chorus reflects the supernatural air of the messenger's report and unknowingly alludes to Orestes' appointment by Apollo's oracle as rescuer (1997, 29-30).

¹⁴⁹ The play as a whole can also be read as a parallel of the Aulis sacrifice, as argued in Sansone 1975. But again, Sansone misses that the sacrifice plays out in reverse order. Aulis begins with adverse winds (15), then the

contrast, restores the proper ritual order and is carried out by a priestess with ritual authority and sound mind (1204, 1207, 1327-38). Rather than accomplishing a true purification, then, the first scene at the shore establishes Orestes' close association with divinity, especially as a sacrificial victim for Artemis, and his need for purification that is yet to be resolved.

Even at his trial Orestes is elevated so that he interacts with his divine accusers on seemingly equal terms. He and the lead Fury take the two platforms and speak in turn about the matricide (961-64). While he relies on Apollo's testimony and Athena's vote to win the case, he stands trial as the Fury's equal in physical space and in speech. This closeness to the divine, physically and in treatment at trial, is combined with increased distance from the world of mortals. Leading up to the trial in which Orestes is treated on par with the Furies, he is nearly excluded from a mortal Athenian festival. The silence and separate cups of the Choes emphasizes the marginalization from his community that accompanies his participation in divine affairs.

As Orestes on the shore appears quasi-divine in part because he is Artemis' sacrificial offering, likewise at Aulis Iphigenia is closely linked to the goddess whose victim she is (Tzanetou 1999-2000, 202). And after being rescued she flies through the *aether*, the physical space reserved for the gods, and the place from which the image of Artemis also came to Tauris (29-30; Wolff 1992, 320). Once established at Tauris she lives in the temple and calls it her

purification of Iphigenia and the deception of Clytemnestra (24-25, 818-19; note that here too, though the reason for lustration – the wedding – is a lie, nevertheless the lustration is assumed to be completed, 861). Then she is brought to the altar and nearly sacrificed (26-27), then finally an animal is slaughtered and she is brought to Tauris and takes on quasi-divine aspects (28-30). Orestes first arrives at Tauris and is mistaken for a divinity, and cattle are slaughtered (93-94, 267-68, 296-300). He is brought to the temple as a victim and his sacrifice is described in anticipation (456-58, 621-26). Then comes the deception of Thoas and the purification of Orestes (1191-1221, 1329-38), and finally an adverse wind (1394-97). For other reversals in *IT* see Torrance 2011, 177-204.

home (δόμων 65-66), as temples are often called homes of the gods. As priestess of Artemis, Iphigenia is the goddess' representative and near-double among mortals (Caldwell 1974-75, 26). The chorus calls her mistress (πότνι', 1123), an honorific also addressed to Artemis three times in *IT* (463, 533, 1082).¹⁵⁰ This title is often given to goddesses, though at times to mortals as a sign of respect, especially by servants (Kyriakou 2006, 361). The text of this address encourages the conflation of Iphigenia and Artemis: "And you, mistress, Argive oars will lead home" (καὶ σὲ μὲν, πότνι', Ἀργεῖα / πεντηκόντερος οἴκον ἄξει, 1123-24).¹⁵¹ First, the placement of Ἀργεῖα after πότνι' allows the audience to hear Ἀρ- and briefly anticipate an address to Artemis. Then, as Kyriakou notes, the entire stanza could be directed to the goddess except for the word οἴκον (2006, 361).¹⁵² Thus as sacrifice, as priestess, and as rescued maiden, Iphigenia takes on aspects of the divine from Artemis.

When Athena appears at the conclusion of *IT* she establishes two new cult practices, both of which perpetuate aspects of Iphigenia's and Orestes' marginality during the tragedy. Although they have escaped their imprisonment at Tauris and purified the pollution, in these rites their predicaments are in a sense restored (Goff 1999, 121). First she commands Orestes to build a temple at Halai to house the stolen image of Artemis:

νόμον τε θεῆς τόνδ'· ὅταν ἐορτάζηι λεώς,
 τῆς σῆς σφαγῆς ἄποιν' ἐπισχέτω ξίφος
 δέρηι πρὸς ἀνδρὸς αἰμά τ' ἐξανιέτω
 ὀσίας ἕκατι θεά θ' ὅπως τιμὰς ἔχη. (1458-61)

¹⁵⁰ Wolff notes other verbal parallels between Iphigenia and Artemis as well: κούραι (411) and κόραν (1114) and τιμαί (748, 776). However it must be noted that he reads 463 as addressed to Iphigenia but, as they are asking the mistress to receive the rites if they are performed correctly, it certainly must be to Artemis (1992, 320).

¹⁵¹ I substitute "Argive oars" for the more precise "an Argive penteconter" to retain the "Mistress, Ar-" ambiguity in translation without interruption by "an."

¹⁵² Temples are the homes of gods but typically δόμοι, not οἴκοι.

And establish this practice: whenever the people celebrate her festival, in payment for your sacrifice let (the priest) hold a sword against the throat of a man and draw his blood, for the sake of sacred law, and so that the goddess might have her honors.¹⁵³

Orestes' participation in the rites is finished once he builds the temple; he will be free of the Furies and presumably return to Mycenae. But Athena leaves this unspoken, focusing instead on his near-sacrifice at Tauris. Her silence on his future life and reinforcement of his role as sacrificial victim diminish the impression of a successful resolution.¹⁵⁴ Every year by proxy Orestes will be nearly sacrificed again, and occupy the space between life and death. Although his life presumably continues after his return, through ritual he remains marginalized as sacrificial victim. Likewise the Choes festival, which Orestes says the Athenians practice in memory of his time there seeking Athena's help, memorializes his pollution and the marginalization he experiences because of it (958-60).

The resolution Athena provides for Iphigenia more concretely reaffirms her marginality, both in life and after her death. She will remain the priestess of Artemis at Brauron, and once dead will receive votives there:

σὲ δ' ἄμφι σεμνάς, Ἰφιγένεια, λείμακας
 Βραυρωνίας δεῖ τῆιδε κληιδουχεῖν θεᾶι,
 οὗ καὶ τεθάψῃ κατανοῦσα, καὶ πέπλων
 ἄγαλμά σοι θήσουσιν εὐπήνους ὑφάς,
 ἃς ἂν γυναῖκες ἐν τόκοις ψυχορραγεῖς
 λείπωσ' ἐν οἴκοις.

(1462-67)

¹⁵³ A priest or other ritual officiant is easily supplied for the subject of ἐπισχέτω and ἐξανιέτω. Ritual prescriptions often leave the subject of the rites unspecified (Cropp 2000, 263).

¹⁵⁴ Similarly, Tzanetou argues that Orestes' experiences at Tauris follow a feminine paradigm of ritual transition, undercutting the apparent success of his return to Greece (1999-2000, 210-12).

It is necessary that you, Iphigenia, hold the keys for the goddess at the holy meadows of Brauron, where you will also be buried when you die, and they will dedicate to you offerings of fine-woven cloth of the garments that women who lose their life in childbirth leave in their homes.

Although Iphigenia escapes Tauris and is no longer made to participate in human sacrifices, she remains forever in the service of Artemis, and upon her death is incorporated into the goddess' cult. As she shares some aspects of Artemis as her priestess at Tauris, she is promised a share in her sanctuary and her ritual honors. It is unclear whether the dedications to Iphigenia will be given in her own name, or (as in other versions of the myth) Iphigenia will take on a particular aspect of Artemis and be completely subsumed into her. With or without a change in name, she moves forever away from mortality and assumes the role of a hero or minor god.¹⁵⁵ Her geographic marginality is lessened, but she does not return home; and though she is forever associated with rituals that transition girls from childhood to adulthood and marriage, she does not complete this transition herself (Ekroth 2003, 64-66). Even the honors she receives after her death suggest ongoing liminality, as she receives clothing from women who die in the transition from pregnancy to motherhood.¹⁵⁶

Power Over Ritual, Power Through Ritual

Mortals are not merely acted upon in ritual contexts; they are actors, and they have partial control over their circumstances. Their power is not equal to divine authority, but neither is it

¹⁵⁵ The transformation into an aspect of Artemis in some versions leads to speculations that Iphigenia originated as an obscure god or as an epithet of Artemis. Dowden argues against this suggestion, which he considers an 'erasure' of her as a hero (1989, 44-46).

¹⁵⁶ Wolff notes that Iphigenia, like a woman who dies in childbirth, provides life for another (Orestes) but fails to continue her own life, instead becoming associated with death (1992, 322).

negligible. Whether used in concert with or in challenge against a god, mortals and their rituals can bring about all manner of good or disastrous things. In *IT*, as Iphigenia and Orestes find themselves in a marginal space between mortality and divinity, their ritual power is magnified. Through their use of religious rites over the course of the tragedy, we can see more clearly the way mortal men and women try to use ritual to interact both with the gods and with other mortals. And the increased ritual ability of the siblings, especially Iphigenia, clearly exemplifies the constantly shifting nature of the status/practice dyad in their religious network. Orestes and Iphigenia participate in rituals which drastically change their status and even cause them to appear quasi-divine, as discussed above. Consequently, they participate differently in subsequent rituals and engage differently with others.

As priestess of the Taurian cult of Artemis, Iphigenia wields the power of life and death over the goddess' sacrificial victims. She does not kill the victims herself, but rather enacts the ritual preparations on the victims before they are killed (621-22).¹⁵⁷ She stands at the margin between the outside world and the temple, between life and death, and ushers her victims across it through her rites. The sacrifice as she describes it differs significantly from the version described in Herodotus; it involves a great deal more ritual, and has more in common with Greek sacrificial practices (O'Bryhim 2000, 32-34). As she controls the movements of her captives towards their death, she also controls the access of other mortals to the temple and consequently to Artemis. She is the temple's key-keeper (130), and determines who can enter the temple and

¹⁵⁷ Cropp distinguishes between *θύω* as the broader process of sacrifice, and *κτείνω* as the killing specifically (1997, 32-33). So Iphigenia sacrifices, but does not kill, the victims. Due in part to some textual problems, there have been debates about whether or not Iphigenia has already sacrificed other foreigners before the play's opening. The general consensus is that she has, though there might be intentional ambiguity in the text to add weight to the impending sacrifice of Orestes and Pylades. See Strachan 1976 and Sansone 1978, 35-47.

when (Cropp 2000, 57). In a very literal way she exercises power over the human sacrifices through her religious status and the rituals that status entails.

Even outside the immediate context of her ritual role, Iphigenia possesses significant authority and respect among mortals. Connelly describes the legal and communal influence Greek priestesses possess, and Euripides' Iphigenia exemplifies this (2007, 213-19). Though a foreigner and a captive (in practice if not in name) she is able to command even the island's king in matters of the temple and its sacrifices. She assures Orestes that Thoas will allow Pylades to leave, for "I will persuade him" (πείσω σφε, 742).¹⁵⁸ She cannot directly oppose his demand for human sacrifice, but in his appearance onstage she effortlessly directs the conversation, and he submits willingly to her instructions while praising her devotion to the rites. She demonstrates great skill in persuasion and deception, taking advantage of her priestly authority and his interest in proper ritual to obtain his cooperation (Kyriakou 2006, 371). Thoas obeys eagerly, impressed with her "reverence for the gods and forethought" (ηύσέβεια καὶ προμηθία, 1202). He complies with whatever she needs to "accomplish well the affairs of the goddess" (τὰ τῆς θεοῦ πρᾶσσ'... καλῶς, 1220). She likewise commands the other Taurians authoritatively; during the escape, she obtains the privacy they need to get away by commanding the Taurians and the temple attendants to keep a sacred distance (1329-32). Though they are suspicious at her actions, they still obey (1334-35). The perception that she is enacting the goddess' rituals affords her far greater trust and compliance than she could otherwise hope for.

¹⁵⁸ She also plans later to persuade him to allow the purification, "persuading him with words" (πείσσα μύθοις, 1049).

Orestes and Pylades also look to Iphigenia's authority, even before learning her identity, and ask her to direct the oath that will lead to her recognition. Orestes asks specifically for a sacred oath, suggesting that he is turning to her authority as priestess: "you begin an oath such as is sacred" (σὺ δ' ἔξαρχ' ὄρκον ὅστις εὐσεβής, 743). She addresses them with confidence and authority, and even chastises Orestes for interrupting her with an exclamation to the gods: "Why do you call on the gods in my speech?" (τί τοὺς θεοὺς ἀνακαλεῖς ἐν τοῖς ἔμοις; 780). Kyriakou notes that this exclamation and retort are the only reference to the gods in the recognition itself, the central event of the play (2006, 262). Scholars take this relative absence of divine references as an indication of how much the action is driven and carried out by mortals, or at least how little the mortals see divine force behind their circumstance.¹⁵⁹ And this particular exchange between the siblings just before they recognize each other is of course a dramatic tool to build anticipation for that moment. But Iphigenia's retort also displays the extent of her quasi-divine authority as priestess. There is no need to call on the gods; she is ritual authority enough.

As a priestess, Iphigenia naturally interacts with the world in a primarily ritual way. Her immediate response to seeing the human-haired column in her dream is to perform sacrificial preparations (54-8). And upon waking from the dream, again her first response is a ritual one; she plans funeral rites for Orestes (61-2, 159-78). She naturally directs the captives in an oath to secure the safe delivery of her letter (735ff.) and threatens a curse against her brother if he should not rescue her (778-9). When scheming to send a message to Orestes, though not praying, she uses a prayer formulation to mention her hopes that things will go well (τὸ δ' εὖ, 580). Even her hopes for vengeance against Menelaus and Helen take a sacrificial form; she hopes they will be

¹⁵⁹ Kyriakou sees it as the failure of Orestes and Iphigenia to recognize the gods' role in the recognition (2006, 278).

captured by the Taurians so that she can sacrifice them in return for the sacrifice she underwent because of them (336-9, 354, 442-5). None of these rites are exactly the ones she is appointed to perform, except for the hoped-for sacrifice of Helen and Menelaus. They illustrate her natural propensity to adapt ritual to her circumstances, “ritual competence” as McClure identifies it, which features more prominently in the escape plot (2017, 115-16).

Orestes does not possess anything like the ritual authority of a priest that he can exert over other mortals. However, his relationship with Apollo’s oracle and the pollution of his matricide inform all his interactions with other mortals and affect his use of religious ritual. As already noted, he is marginalized at Athens because of his pollution. His experience there not only sets him apart from the others, but also establishes new ritual practices. He lacks the authority to direct ritual that his sister possesses, but like the *pharmakos* his presence and his marginalization leave a lasting mark. Orestes also enjoys some element of authority in the context of his instructions from Delphi. Despite the doubts he expresses about Apollo’s support, he and his companion expect his success and possibly the help of a god. Orestes emphasizes that he has come to Tauris at the command of Apollo (93, 978) and sees himself as responsible for fulfilling the oracle (120-21). Pylades wonders by what “contrivance” he will acquire the cult image (μηχανάς, 112). In combination with προσφέροντε this is a reference to siege machinery (Kyriakou 2006, 80). But the term’s connection in theater to gods appearing suddenly above the stage also suggests the possibility of a divine rescuer to assist in stealing the statue when mortal attempts fail. However, though Athena appears at the end, Orestes and Iphigenia remove the image of Artemis through their own power, not divine but more than mortal.

Iphigenia and Orestes combine their religious powers in the second half of the tragedy to steal the image of Artemis and escape Tauris together. They do so, strikingly, by inventing new

rituals based on the reality of Orestes' pollution and the image's need for purification (Burnett 1971, 59). On the surface, Iphigenia is able to deceive Thoas and the temple attendants by pretending to fulfill ritual duties, drawing on the authority of her priesthood. Scholars have seen this trick as an exploitation of ritual and her position.¹⁶⁰ But although she is using rituals or a semblance of them for her own benefit, the feigned rituals have real effects. By pretending to purify Orestes and the image of Artemis, Iphigenia fulfills her dream of purifying the pillar of her house and helps bring about the actual remission of Orestes' pollution and the removal of Artemis from a cult of human sacrifice to a more 'civilized' one in Greece.

It is generally understood that these consequences are not intended by Iphigenia.¹⁶¹ However, she has spoken to Orestes. She knows that he is haunted by Furies and seeking purification from his matricide. Likewise, she is aware of the Oracle's instructions to remove the image of Artemis from a cult that she agrees is unholy and unbecoming of the goddess. Although Orestes had not entered the temple and caused the image to turn away, although Iphigenia has never before needed to purify the image or a victim from pollution, although she does intend to use her purification on the shore as a way to escape, none of these precludes the possibility that she does, in fact, purify both the cult statue and the men before they make their escape. The report from the temple attendant allows the possibility that this might have occurred (Treischnigg 2008, 475). He cannot see what is happening, as Iphigenia demands privacy to do her rites. But he hears indistinguishable chanting:

¹⁶⁰ Wolff says that she exploits and appropriates ritual (1992, 312 and 330). Goff sees her as hiding behind it (1999, 113). To Burnett, she uses the truth of the pollution as a convenient means of escape (1971, 59).

¹⁶¹ Numerous scholars have recognized the real purification that comes about because of the escape. Sansone 1975, 287 and 292; Wolff 1992, 317; Goff 1999, 113; Treischnigg 2008, 470. Goff in particular argues for Iphigenia's ignorance of the real purificatory power of her rites.

χρόνῳ δ' ἴν' ἡμῖν δρᾶν τι δὴ δοκοῖ πλέον,
 ἀνωλόλυξε καὶ κατῆιδε βάρβαρα
 μέλη μαγεύουσ'... (1336-38)

In time, so that it would seem to us that she was doing something complete, she cried out and sung barbarian songs like a magician...

The messenger expresses obvious disdain for Iphigenia's actions and believes them to be entirely false; scholars often take his version of events as definitive (Kyriakou 2006, 424-25). However, the attendant is missing the context of Orestes' actual *miasma* and the mission to remove the image of Artemis from the polluting practice of human sacrifice. His report about what happens out of his sight is necessarily an unreliable narration.

Certainly, the chanting could be gibberish and the long time on the shore can be explained by the need to wait for the hidden boat to come in close enough to board. But on the other hand, what is there to prevent the possibility that Iphigenia took the opportunity while she waited to perform actual rites of purification? Although she hates the human sacrifices at Tauris and does not believe that Artemis desires them, she serves the goddess dutifully and believes she is acting according to her will.¹⁶² And the pollution of her brother's matricide would surely pose a problem to her, both because she is inviolable as the priestess of Artemis (798-99) and because her brother is afflicted by Furies due to his pollution. Iphigenia's prayer to Artemis just before she goes down to the shore also makes the most sense if she intends to actually purify Orestes. She speaks the prayer primarily as a part of her deception of the Taurians, but she carefully words it to be a true prayer for their escape:

ἦν νίψω φόνον
 τῶνδε καὶ θύσωμεν οὐ̃ χρή, καθαρὸν οἰκήσεις δόμον,
 εὐτυχεῖς δ' ἡμεῖς ἐσόμεθα. (1230-32)

¹⁶² Burnett 1971, 59-60.

If I wash the pollution from these men and we sacrifice where we ought, you will live in a pure home, and we will have good fortune.

The sacrifice in the proper place, a pure temple, and good fortune are all easily recognized by the audience as references to the escape (Cropp 2000, 247). There is no obvious double meaning for the purification, and it makes more sense that the priestess intends to perform a purification than that she prays falsely to Artemis.

As mentioned previously, the description of Iphigenia's purification ritual reflects the earlier ritual language of Orestes' madness, which also takes place at the seashore. Orestes slaughters cattle washed in the sea, is veiled, and is bound and led away. Iphigenia now repeats these same actions in reverse, first binding Orestes and Pylades and leading them back to the shore, then veiling them, then performing purificatory rites in the sea. The first set of actions are a reversal of normal practice, are saturated with the madness and *miasma* of the Furies, and lead to capture by barbarians and a planned human sacrifice. The second restores the proper order, intends to remove the *miasma* of matricide, and leads to escape and return to the civilization and sanitized rites of Greece.

At the tragedy's opening, both Orestes and Iphigenia have been (at least partially) rescued by Apollo and Artemis. As they board their ship to escape Tauris near its conclusion, they are rescuing themselves and each other. In doing so they assume some characteristics of the gods they are acting in place of. When she rescues Iphigenia at Aulis, Artemis replaces her with a deer as sacrificial victim. Now, about to rescue his sister at Tauris, Orestes slaughters cattle in a

replacement for his own intended sacrifice to Artemis (296-300).¹⁶³ His association with the goddess here is encouraged by the comparison to a hunter, as discussed above. On that same shore Iphigenia carries out purificatory rites that also reflect elements of the sacrifice at Aulis (Tzanetou 1999-2000, 211; Wolff 313). And as Artemis carries the maiden through the *aether* and settles her at Tauris (29-30) now Orestes bears Iphigenia through the shallows to the boat (1381-83) and promises to bring her across the sea to Mycenae (981-82).¹⁶⁴ Iphigenia asks Artemis to save her as she once saved her at Aulis (1082-84); her prayer only emphasizes that the goddess is taking no action, and is in fact being acted upon.

The siblings also take up the role of Apollo as they carry out his will. Orestes exhorts Iphigenia to “carry out with me the salvation ordained for us” (ἦνπερ ἡμῶν ὄρισεν σωτηρίαν / σύμπραξον, 979-80). And in the final stasimon the chorus draws attention to Apollo’s tendency to overtake religious rituals, alter and appropriate them for himself. He takes Delphi from Themis and persuades Zeus to confuse the dreams sent by Gaia (1234-83). In *IT* he exerts his influence on the rites of Artemis at Tauris, by sending Orestes to steal the image and bring it to Athens where it will be honored without human sacrifice. Cropp notes the parallel between Apollo’s struggle at Delphi to Orestes’ quest at Tauris (2000, 248). He does not, however, link Apollo to Iphigenia as well. Not only does she assist in removing Artemis from her temple, but she also appropriates the rituals of her priestesshood to carry out the escape.

¹⁶³ The slaughter of the cattle is most commonly linked to Sophocles *Ajax* and Euripides *HF* (Cropp 2000, 194-5); for the cattle as animal substitute for his sacrifice, see Sansone 1975, 287. At Aulis Iphigenia is lifted “like a calf” (ὥστε μόσχον, 359), so cattle are a fitting substitute for the second near-human sacrifice.

¹⁶⁴ She does not return to Mycenae, as it turns out; but he does bear her across the sea, and she is established at a temple of Artemis much like she had been at Tauris (1462-63).

The Divine Object of Ritual

As demonstrated above, the gods in *IT* cause significant changes to the mortals through their ritual contacts. And the mortals interact with one another and bring about further shifts due to their changes in status and their ritual authority. But the divine involvement in *IT*'s rituals extends beyond affecting mortals. The divine-mortal interactions are reciprocal, though not equal in power. Through ritual mortals affect their relationship with the gods, influence divine plans, and even change their cult aspects.¹⁶⁵ And much like mortals, the gods use their religious status and ritual authority to interact with one another. This is most apparent in the treatment of Artemis (or at least her cult image) almost as a prize or pawn to be moved, both by her brother Apollo and by the mortals Orestes, Iphigenia, and Thoas. Their actions have significant effects on the goddess. Orestes is also able to use ritual interactions to receive help from Apollo; Apollo interferes with the ritual powers of Themis and Gaia; and he and Athena help Orestes change the role and rites of the Furies and Artemis. These events demonstrate that the mortals and gods of *IT* are connected in a dynamic network in which all parties can change and be changed through their interactions with others. While in *Alceste* the substitution and reversal of deaths involve numerous exchanges that affect both gods and mortals, the more explicitly ritual context of *IT* with the cult image of Artemis, the priesthood of Iphigenia, and the intended sacrifice of Orestes and Pylades, leads to clearer and more far-reaching consequences to the interactions.

Though Artemis does not appear in *IT*, she is the object of speech and action throughout. Most prominently, her cult image in Tauris is the object of Orestes' quest, the object of

¹⁶⁵ In this I argue against Sansone's remark that the mortals are changed but not the gods (1975, 293).

Iphigenia's deceptive purification, and the means of the siblings' escape.¹⁶⁶ Both Iphigenia and Orestes treat Artemis' image as an object to be acted upon and used, without clear signs of the goddess' will. Orestes plans to take it from the temple and give it to Athens (λαβόντα... δοῦναι, 89, 91); Iphigenia carries it to the shore for purification and escape (1044-45). Iphigenia's claim that the image moves "of its own will" (αὐτόματον, 1167), ironic as the audience knows she is moving and using it for her own ends, emphasizes the lack of agency shown by Artemis in the course of the play and the extent to which she and her image are acted upon as object.¹⁶⁷ Perhaps even more emphatic would be the visual effect of the scene. Iphigenia carries the sacred image out onstage, a god appearing onstage as a thing in a mortal's arms, in stark contrast with Athena's later appearance over the stage in a place of power and authority.

Elsewhere too mortal characters speculate about the will of Artemis in the present circumstances, without clear indication from the goddess. The Taurians assume that she takes pleasure in their human sacrifices: the herdsman calls them "pleasant" (φίλον, 243); the temple attendant claims that "the goddess dedicated (Orestes) to her altars" (ὄν τοῖσδε βωμοῖς θεὰ καθωσιώσατο, 1320); Thoas considers sacrificing the captives to be "deciding in favor of the goddess" (εἰς τὸ τῆς θεοῦ γ' ἐξένευσας, 1186) and believes he can recapture them "with the goddess' help" (σὺν δὲ τῆι θεῶι, 1425). The Greeks, of course, disagree with the Taurian view of

¹⁶⁶ Contra Zeitlin's assertion that Iphigenia is the object of Orestes' quest (1985, 76). Until the recognition he seeks only the cult image; after, he hopes to rescue both from Tauris, and considers both together when he thinks of escape (980-82, 1010-15). Wolff has a discussion on religious thefts in myth, ritual, and law (1992, 314-17).

¹⁶⁷ Burnett claims that the statue's agency saves the mortal siblings, because Iphigenia's statement that it moved of its own will is rooted in her certainty of Artemis' will (1971, 48, 60). However, Iphigenia does not have certain knowledge of divine will in the matter until Athena's appearance (and even then, Artemis' opinion is not mentioned). When plotting the escape, she determines to claim that the statue is polluted so that they can remove it from the temple; the plan is primarily one of necessity, not of concern for the goddess' will.

Artemis. Iphigenia accuses the Taurians of “project(ing) their impurity on the goddess” (ἐς τὴν θεὸν τὸ φαῦλον ἀναφέρειν, 390) when they offer her human sacrifices. But she also projects her view of human sacrifice on Artemis, even directly telling her that “it is improper” (οὐ πρόπει, 1087) for the goddess to be at Tauris. Similarly Orestes argues that the goddess must approve of his quest: “if this were repugnant to Artemis, how could Loxias have decreed it” (εἰ πρόσαντες ἦν τόδε / Ἀρτέμιδι, πῶς ἂν Λοξίας ἐθέσπισεν, 1012-13). The only basis for Iphigenia’s statement is her own opinion of how the gods ought to be; for Orestes’, the assumption that Artemis wills what her brother does. Neither has any confirmation of these things from Artemis.

What Artemis’ opinion is on her sacrifices and the treatment of her cult image, Euripides does not clarify.¹⁶⁸ Whether the Taurians or the Greeks are more right in their assessment, both groups use their declarations about the goddess’ will to support their own interests, and the actions informed by their opinions of Artemis affect her. The Taurians do, as Iphigenia accuses, use their claims about Artemis to justify human sacrifice. They keep her image in a bloody temple and implicate her in the slaughter of foreigners. Orestes and Iphigenia use theirs to excuse the desecration of a temple and theft of a cult image. And in stealing the image, they also have a lasting effect on Artemis and her cult image. She will maintain her connection to the Taurians both in her cult title, Tauropolis, and in the mock sacrifice (1456-61). But she will reside in a new temple, in Athenian territory, and Athena institutes new ritual practice for her as much as for Iphigenia and Orestes. So regardless of whether Artemis wills or merely tolerates her Taurian

¹⁶⁸ Modern scholars tend to agree that Iphigenia is wrong in her assessment of Artemis. Hartigan argues that the sacrifice at Aulis contradicts the possibility that the goddess rejects human sacrifice (1991, 92). Wolff points to the mock sacrifice at Halai and Athena’s concern for Artemis’ honors as proof against Iphigenia’s opinion (1992, 318). Kyriakou also dismisses it as Artemis establishes Iphigenia as priestess in a human sacrifice cult for years (2006, 15).

rites or her image's theft, the mortals who establish the place and manner of her cult rituals alter the title and aspect of the goddess.

Orestes serves Apollo and cooperates with the declarations of his oracle. But he also uses the means available to him to further his own interests with the god. So when the trial at Athens fails to release him from all the Furies, he uses his own life and the threat of pollution against Apollo to demand his help:

πρόσθεν ἀδύτων ἐκταθείς, νῆστις βορᾶς,
ἐπώμοσ' αὐτοῦ βίον ἀπορρήξειν θανών,
εἰ μή με σώσει Φοῖβος. (973-75)

Stretching out before his sanctuary, abstaining from food, I swore that I would cut off my life and die there, unless Phoebus saved me.

Even natural death causes pollution harmful to the gods. By starving himself, Orestes brings this threat against Apollo's sanctuary and pushes him to act (Cropp 2000, 233). While according to Parker bringing pollution in contact with a god harms only the polluting mortal, not the god, here Orestes believes the pollution of his death is a valid threat to Apollo (1983, 145-46). The god's response seems to affirm this. Though it would cost him his life, Orestes is capable of causing significant harm to a god. This affirmation of pollution's threat lays a foundation for the subsequent escape plot, revolving around the threat of pollution against the image and sanctuary of Artemis.¹⁶⁹

The gods consider rituals important enough that they use them even in their interactions with other gods, and work to turn rituals to their own advantage. In *IT* Euripides shows Apollo

¹⁶⁹ Orestes also mentions an *aetion* for the Areopagus court that involves *miasma* harmful to a god: "Zeus once established it for Ares because of pollution on his hands" (ἦν Ἄρει ποτὲ / Ζεὺς εἴσατ' ἕκ του δὴ χερῶν μιάσματος, 945-46).

involved in three divine conflicts, all of which involve changes to ritual honors. In the present he charges Orestes with removing Artemis from her Taurian rituals and establishing her rites in Athens instead. Before the play's opening, he and Athena work to end the Furies' pursuit of Orestes and establish them in an Athenian sanctuary.¹⁷⁰ And the Chorus sings of how in his infancy he steals Delphi from Themis and asks Zeus to confuse the dreams sent by Gaia to protect his oracular status (1234-82). In each of these events, the changes in ritual affect the identities of the gods involved. While the actions within ritual facilitate interactions between gods and men, the negotiation of rituals is a means for interaction and competition among the gods. Apollo gains status by appropriating Delphi and discrediting Gaia's dreams; he 'civilizes' his rivals in the matter of Orestes by setting them in a new ritual context; and by transplanting and modifying Artemis' Taurian rites, he brings his sister closer in line with himself and his ritual standing.

When Iphigenia prays asking Artemis to help her escape with Orestes and the goddess' cult image, she indicates that Artemis could harm Apollo's reputation as oracle if she does not: "save me now, and these men also, or because of you the mouth of Loxias will no longer be true for mortals" (σῶσόν με καὶ νῦν τούσδε τ'· ἢ τὸ Λοξίου / οὐκέτι βροτοῖσι διὰ σ' ἐτήτυμον στόμα, 1084-85).¹⁷¹ Cropp recognizes that an untrustworthy oracle is a threat to mortals, who need reliable contact with the gods (2000, 238). But this result would also be detrimental to Apollo,

¹⁷⁰ The episode is only briefly mentioned, leaving a great deal to be inferred from Aeschylus and elsewhere or left uncertain. The title Eumenides is not mentioned, and no specifics about their sanctuary or cult honors are given. The Furies of *IT* are certainly not the Eumenides of Aeschylus as some of them continue their pursuit, but Euripides does specify that Athena grants them a sanctuary near Athens as compensation for breaking off their attack. So there is a clear shift in their role and honors, though not explicitly in name.

¹⁷¹ Orestes also worries about being the cause of discredit to Apollo's oracle by failing in his quest (120-21).

who greatly desires the ritual honors it brings him. When the chorus relates the founding of the oracle and the confusion of Gaia's dreams some 200 lines later, it becomes clear that any discredit to Delphi would anger Apollo and invite retaliation.

Conclusion

From its beginnings at Aulis and Delphi to its resolution in the cults at Halai and Brauron, the entire action of *IT* is accomplished through and informed by ritual observances. Sacrifice, prophecy, *miasma*, and purification both cause and resolve the crises in which Orestes and Iphigenia toil. They begin their relationships with Apollo and Artemis in violent and drastic events, a human sacrifice and a matricide ordered by an oracle. These events alter both of their lives in equally drastic ways. Pushed to the margins of mortal existence, they take on certain aspects of divinity. They continue to engage with the gods through ritual, but their new statuses provide them with a greater power to use and alter rites. With this increased religious influence, Orestes and Iphigenia then take actions that, again, alter their status. The progression of rituals and effects, from Aulis and Delphi to Tauris and from there to Athens and new cults, illustrates the cyclical nature of ritual interactions. Religious rites facilitate contact between gods and mortals through which mortals can change and be changed. The gods, too, achieve and experience change through ritual. So the religious network of relationships and interactions between mortals and gods, even in such a limited group of agents, is shown to be dynamic, always shifting as actions change roles, and roles affect actions. Within this complex network, it is no wonder that the characters experience a great deal of uncertainty as to what the outcome will be.

When Athena appears to Thoas she asserts that the escape of Orestes with Iphigenia and the cult image is “destined” (πεπρωμένον, 1438), and again that “necessity prevails over (Thoas) and the gods” (τὸ γὰρ χρεῶν σοῦ τε καὶ θεῶν κρατεῖ, 1486). Her declarations offer no clarity for how or why outcomes have been decided, but indicate that gods are subject to the same forces as mortals in working out their goals. And while there is an ultimate plan of some kind, even up to the final scene both mortal and divine agents are working at odds with one another: Orestes and Iphigenia, Thoas and the Taurians, Poseidon and Athena. There is no unified effort to accomplish what is destined. Rather, ‘necessity’ emerges from these characters’ often opposing actions. Divine will is indiscernible to Iphigenia and Orestes, as has often been noted, in part because of the limitations of contact between gods and mortals; but even more than this, because there is no single divine will to discern. It is possible, however, for them to engage with the gods through ritual and work with them toward their own ends, thus helping to bring about ‘necessity.’

Chapter 4: Madness, Death, and Divinity in *Heracles*

In *Heracles Furens* Euripides presents a treatment of the madness of Heracles that plays with the hero's intermediacy, collapses distinctions between divine and mortal, and grapples with questions of why and how the gods interact with mortals. As in *Alcestis*, Heracles successfully returns a friend (Theseus) from death; and again, Euripides depicts the uncomfortable aftermath of a god's intervention in mortal affairs. Like Apollo's rescue of Admetus from his fated death, the madness that Iris and Lyssa impose on Heracles comes at an unusual point, this time in the middle of the play, and does not resolve the situation. Instead, Theseus arrives at the end to provide resolution much as Heracles appears in *Alcestis*, a mortal with some semblance of divine authority. Like *IT*, *Heracles Furens* (*HF*) features purification rituals and mortals with close associations to a god; but unlike *IT*, these lead not to rescue but disaster. Heracles, like Iphigenia, freely criticizes the gods; but Heracles' own future as an Olympian god brings new implications to his criticism. Broadly, *HF* portrays mortal interactions with the divine that are more starkly unhappy for the mortals involved.

Critical Considerations: Myth, Structure, and Morality

Heracles is one of the figures of Greek myth who straddles different worlds with ease. He is the son of Zeus and the mortal Alcmena, a semi-divine hero, and an Olympian god. Pindar calls him "hero god," (ἥρωας θεός, *Nem.* 3.22) and he is honored throughout the Greek world in both roles, separately or together (Burkert 1985, 208). Although numerous Greek heroes enjoy cult honors after their deaths and attain some attributes of divinity, Heracles is unique in the

completeness of his *apotheosis*, living as a god on Olympus.¹⁷² Along with this paradoxical identity, Heracles' character is contradictory in a number of other ways. He is strong, victorious, a protector, a killer of animals and monsters; but he is also a slave, drunkard, madman, and killer of his own family (Burkert 1985, 209-10). On the Athenian stage, Heracles appears most frequently in comedy and satyr. His known roles in tragedy are fairly limited: he appears as a *deus ex machina* in Sophocles *Philoctetes*, and a rescuer in Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* and Euripides *Alcestis* (which is often considered not entirely tragedy). He appears in similar roles in a number of lost or fragmentary plays.¹⁷³ He has a greater role as tragic hero in Sophocles *Trachiniae* and here in *HF*, but these may be the only two 5th-century Attic tragedies to depict a suffering Heracles. Silk suggests that the reason for this is that the hero's complex nature, his unique position of being both mortal and divine, made such a tragic plot difficult and contradictory (1985, 3-5). In *HF* the duality that defines Heracles runs as a theme throughout the play, as Heracles moves between Hades and the living world, between his mortal and divine fathers, between his roles as heroic rescuer and monstrous killer. When Heracles questions and criticizes the gods in the final scene, he is facing the problems of his own identity as well as the problems of the religious universe in which he operates.

From the opening scene of *HF* Euripides significantly alters the myth of Heracles. By placing the episode of his madness at the end of his career he changes the hero's status. Having completed his labors, Heracles is on the cusp of divinity; and having just returned from Hades,

¹⁷² Shapiro 1983, 9. Shapiro gives a thorough overview of the various cults and myths of Heracles as they have been preserved for us, in an effort to understand how a figure so unique to the Greek pantheon came to be.

¹⁷³ These include Phrynichus' *Alcestis*, Sophocles' *Athamas*, Euripides' *Auge*, and Critias' *Pirithous* (Silk 1985, 4).

his liminality and power over life and death are emphasized. In the commonly accepted tradition Heracles performs his labors as punishment for having killed Megara; here, he is about to complete his final labor and Megara still lives. Marshall characterizes it as a “delicate balance” between the familiarity of the circumstances and the changes to tradition (2017, 187). Although by the end of the tragedy it is clear that he has reversed the order of events, Marshall argues that at its beginning Megara’s death appears to be negated entirely (2017, 184). By reversing the order of these events Euripides arranges it so that Heracles experiences his madness at a moment in which he is most vividly experiencing his semi-divinity. He puts in stark opposition to one another the victorious liminal experience of Heracles’ katabasis and return from Hades, and the destructive liminality of his madness. The first event demonstrates his power as a son of Zeus and initiates him into the holy mysteries of the Orphic afterlife. Having descended to Hades and returned still alive, he is the closest he has ever been to divinity. Immediately thereafter the second event prompts him to question and condemn the nature of the very gods to whom he is drawing ever closer. This contrast is all the more noteworthy given that this order of events is (among extant texts) unique to Euripides.

Based on extant texts it seems that Euripides also invented the circumstances at both the opening and the close of the play. His addition of Lycus and Theseus to the story of Heracles’ madness allows him to portray Heracles at the play’s start, and Theseus at the end, as types of the *deus ex machina* in contrast to the true *deus ex machina* in the center. Lycus the usurper and his threats to kill Megara and the children of Heracles are attested nowhere before here (Bond 1981, xxvii).¹⁷⁴ His presence allows Euripides to portray Heracles at two extremes, first the hero

¹⁷⁴ There is, however, attestation of his ancestor by the same name, also a usurper at Thebes (Bond 1981, 69-70)

rescuing his family and immediately afterward Heracles the aggressor against his own family. Scholars have noted parallels between Lycus and Heracles, suggesting the possibility that Lycus is meant to be a foil or double for Heracles.¹⁷⁵ Heracles' exile to Athens at Theseus' invitation also appears to be an invention of Euripides (Marshall 2017, 188). While gods intervene directly and violently at the tragedy's center, its conclusion is left to a heroic but mortal peer of Heracles. Theseus' own status as a hero particularly venerated at Athens, and the fact that like Heracles he is recently returned from Hades and therefore in a liminal state, also invite reflection on the nature of heroes and the divides between life and death and mortality and immortality, topics that are closely linked to this tragedy.

A prominent focus in scholarship on *HF* is the tragedy's structure, which scholars identify as broken into either two or three distinct segments. Like many Euripidean plays it can be considered a 'double plot' divided into two distinct story arcs: the first, a suppliant/rescue plot, reaches its resolution partway through when Heracles returns and slays Lycus. The second centers on the madness of Heracles and its aftermath, with the appearance of Iris and Lyssa serving as conclusion of the first plot and the prologue to the second. In the other view, the suppliant plot is followed by a second section comprised of the divine appearance and the report of Heracles' madness, and a third in which Heracles speaks with Amphitryon and Theseus about what he has endured.¹⁷⁶ Whether in two parts or in three, *HF* is thoroughly criticized by

¹⁷⁵ Ruck notes that Lycus and Heracles would be played by the same actor, that Lycus is described with "tawny" hair similar to the lion pelt Heracles wears, and that both voice pessimistic views of Heracles' feats (1976, 57). He also observes the etymological link between Lycus and Lyssa, the goddess who causes Heracles' madness (59).

¹⁷⁶ Michelini proposes a double-plot division (1987, 231) as do Bond, who notes the function of Iris and Lyssa as a second prologue (1981, 281), and Lee, who argues strongly against the three-part division as forcing an unnatural break in between the messenger speech and Heracles' gradual realization of what has just been described (1980, 34-

nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars as being poorly composed, disjointed, and entirely non-Aristotelian.¹⁷⁷ More recent works push back against this notion to varying degrees, drawing out themes and parallels that tie together the play's sections, and advocating ideas of unity that look beyond the causal form prescribed by Aristotle.¹⁷⁸ This less prescriptive approach provides room to appreciate the arrangement of the tragedy's parts as deliberate and artful work by Euripides and develop new interpretations drawing on the changes and parallels of the different sections. From the perspective of religious interpretation, I read *HF* as a play of two sections, unified by several themes and images: the religious status of Heracles, the altars of Zeus, and the intervention of near-divine mortals in the absence of help from unresponsive gods.

Another dominant topic in studies of *HF*, and one of particular relevance to this project, is the question of the justice, morality, and even veracity, of the gods and heroes of myth. The sudden and grotesquely violent downfall of the victorious Heracles shocks, and leaves spectators grasping for a way to make sense of it or find satisfactory resolution. Heracles himself speaks against the gods near the tragedy's conclusion. He criticizes the roles of Zeus and Hera in his suffering and declares that he does not believe that gods do such things as his own existence and the action of the play show them to do. Scholars have proposed a wide variety of interpretations to address the questions of divine existence, justice, and morality raised by the disturbing progression of the plot and the obviously contradictory statements of Heracles at its end.

35). Kamerbeek advocates the three-part reading (1966, 3-4); Burnett agrees (1971, 157-58), and likewise Shelton (1979, 101).

¹⁷⁷ Most famously, and frequently quoted in more recent readings, are the scathing descriptions of *HF* as a "grotesque abortion" (Swinburne quoted in Verrall 1895, 136) and "broken-backed" (Murray 1914, 112).

¹⁷⁸ See especially Chalk 1962, Kamerbeek 1966, Shelton 1979, Lee 1980, and Barlow 1982

The history of using *HF* as “proof” of Euripides’ impiety or atheism reaches back to the third century CE, when a rhetorical exercise imagines the tragedian on trial for having staged it (Lefkowitz 2016, 56). Verrall takes up the idea of a rationalist Euripides who signals to intelligent viewers that the drama should not be understood literally (1895, 135-36). Heracles’ strong statements against the gods fuel numerous variations on the extra-dramatic, anti-Olympian message of Euripides in *HF*.¹⁷⁹ Others, unwilling to go as far in their interpretation, see in *HF* a portrait of the gods as unexplainable, beyond human conception, and far outside the scope of mortal ideas of justice and good behavior.¹⁸⁰ As Heracles and Theseus work out the conclusion of the play without divine assistance, many read it as a triumph of humanity, or at least an expression of preference for mortal virtues over divine interference.¹⁸¹ Given such diversity of opinions on this matter, and the fairly subjective nature of the question, it is natural to arrive at the conclusion that Euripides intended his *HF* to create ambiguity, contradiction, and disturbance in the portrayal of the divine order. If resolution and understanding are difficult to come to at the tragedy’s close, it is by design. *HF* is meant to disturb. Euripides offers neither the resolution of a confident atheistic (or anti-theistic) message, nor the comfort of a humanist triumph. The obvious inscrutability and injustice of the divine plan is paired uncomfortably with the closeness of Heracles to divinity, the malleability of the boundaries between gods and mortals, and the numerous personal and ritual points of contact between the two worlds.

¹⁷⁹ Brown 1978, Mikalson 1986, Michelini 1987, Lawrence 1998

¹⁸⁰ Shelton 1979, Lee 1980, Lefkowitz 2016

¹⁸¹ Galinsky 1972, Silk 1985, Marshall 2017

Though critics take various directions in their interpretations of divinity and mortality in *Heracles*, they share a tendency to draw a sharp distinction between divine and mortal, even when discussing a figure of Greek mythology who is known specifically for being both human and a god. This tendency is problematic; it resists the subtleties of intermediacy that are inherent to the ritual system. Can Heracles really be considered a ‘triumph of humanity’ when he is to become an Olympian god? His story must be understood as part of a more dynamic framework of interactions and identity shifts. As easy as it is to look for Heracles to ‘choose’ one world over the other, for Euripides to affirm the superiority of one group while criticizing the other, greater nuance is necessary. Heracles may claim Amphitryon as his ‘true’ father, but he cannot entirely separate himself from his divine father Zeus or his future position as a hero-god. He may condemn the actions and violence of the gods, but he is ultimately inseparable from his own violent past and the tools of his violence. In the search for a satisfactory interpretation of the tragedy, it is tempting to push past these paradoxes; but this is a mistake. The paradox of Heracles, the threat he poses as both a mortal and a god, and indeed the similarity between the problematic behaviors of humans and gods, are features of the play rather than hindrances. In the question of mortal and divine affairs, Euripides does not attempt to declare a winner but rather sheds light on the faults of both.

Emphasis on Heracles’ status, semi-divinity:

From the first words of *Amphitryon* Euripides emphasizes the particular intermediacy of Heracles not only as a half-god, the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, but also as one who acknowledges two fathers, one divine and the other mortal. Amphitryon identifies himself first as “the bedmate of Zeus” (Διὸς σύλλεκτρον, 1), but also emphatically calls himself “this man,

father of Heracles” (πατέρα τόνδ’ Ἡρακλέους, 3) at the climax of his opening phrase.¹⁸² Lycus questions the story, calling it “empty boasts that Zeus shared your son’s conception together with you” (κόμπους κενούς / ὡς σύγγαμός σοι Ζεὺς τέκνου τε κοινεῶν, 148-49) and in response Amphitryon speaks as though both he and Zeus have some distinct part of his paternity: “Zeus can look after Zeus’ share of our son; but as for what concerns me... (τῷ τοῦ Διὸς μὲν Ζεὺς ἀμυνέτω μέρει / παιδὸς· τὸ δ’ εἰς ἔμ’, 170-1).¹⁸³ The chorus maintains the sense that Heracles has two fathers: “whether I call him the son of Zeus or of Amphitryon” (εἴτε Διὸς νιν εἶπω / εἴτ’ Ἀμφιτρύωνος ἴνιν, 353-54). Rather than framing his semi-divinity in terms of a mortal mother and divine father, Euripides emphasizes an impossible duality of paternity. Even the staging of the opening scene leans into the dual paternity, as Heracles’ mortal father attempts in vain to protect the hero’s family at his divine father’s altar. Heracles’ identity is in tension between two seemingly contradictory realities, his intermediacy so complete that he can occupy both.¹⁸⁴ The impossibility of his shared fatherhood, however, may anticipate the conflict that will come to the fore in the second half. The audience knows that Amphitryon as father and Zeus as father are mutually exclusive; it may be unsurprising that Heracles eventually rejects one and claims the other. For the moment, though, he is suspended between these two possibilities.

Heracles has demonstrated his commitment to both of his fathers and their respective worlds. He has fought alongside the gods with divine-like power in the gigantomachy.

¹⁸² Greek text is from Barlow 1996 unless otherwise specified. Translations are my own.

¹⁸³ Amphitryon reiterates his shared paternity less optimistically later, criticizing Zeus for not intervening: “O Zeus, in vain did I have you sharing my marriage, in vain I called you partner as far as our son” (ὦ Ζεῦ, μάτην ἄρ’ ὀμόγαμόν σ’ ἐκτησάμην, / μάτην δὲ παιδὸς κοινεῶν’ ἐκληζόμεν, 339-40).

¹⁸⁴ Papadimitropoulos describes it as “a constant oscillation between mortal and divine spheres” (2008, 137). See also Ruck 1976, 66 and Shelton 1979, 104.

Amphitryon boasts that Heracles rode in Zeus' chariot and calls on his thunderbolt, a traditional symbol of his divine power, as proof of Heracles' participation in the battle (178-80). With the power he gains from his divine lineage Heracles helps Zeus establish his divine authority over gods, monsters, and men. Conversely, he has also worked to regain his mortal father Amphitryon's home of Argos. It is to accomplish this goal that he undertakes the labors set by Eurystheus (15-22). This aetiology for the labors is unattested previously; Euripides likely invents it, and in doing so emphasizes Heracles' dedication to his mortal father parallel to his service to his divine father. But while his motivation for the labors emphasizes the hero's humanity, the labors themselves amplify the divine aspect of his nature.¹⁸⁵ His labors for Eurystheus set him against a variety of supernatural creatures such as the centaurs, flesh-eating horses, and the hydra. In them he also benefits several gods in their ritual contexts: he clears the sacred precinct of Zeus (359-60), glorifies Artemis (378-79), and holds up the gods' starry home for Atlas (405-7). Even at his most human Heracles is shown performing supernatural feats and engaging with the gods on a quasi-divine level.

In his final labor Heracles goes to the underworld to retrieve the three-headed dog of Hades (23-25, 610-15). His descent to Hades brings new associations of intermediacy. To his family at home, he seems as if dead; and since they have not heard from him, perhaps truly dead. Lycus easily conflates his trip to Hades with death: "do you think that their father lying dead in Hades will return?" (ἢ τὸν παρ' Ἄϊδι πατέρα τῶνδε κείμενον / πιστεύεθ' ἤξειν; 145-46).¹⁸⁶ Megara and the chorus take up the same position: "Which of the dead has come back out of

¹⁸⁵ Papadimitropoulos 2008, 137; Silk 1985, 13

¹⁸⁶ κείμενον emphatically pushes Heracles' journey from *katabasis* to death (Bond 1981, 103).

Hades?” (τίς θανόντων ἦλθεν ἐξ Ἄιδου πάλιν; 297); “There he is finishing his life, wretched, he has not returned” (ἴν’ ἐκπεραίνει τάλας / βίοτον, οὐδ’ ἔβα πάλιν 428-29). Both Amphitryon and Megara address the absent Heracles in a way that they intend as an address to a deceased loved one: Amphitryon promises to defend his good name, which he does by affirming Heracles’ divine attributes and association with Zeus in the gigantomachy (171ff.). Megara begs him to appear, even if only as a shade (490-96). Both follow conventions for addresses to the dead, especially the heroic dead (Barlow 1996, 133, 147). Marshall suggests that the characters are unable to distinguish a heroic *katabasis* from permanent death or conceive of anyone returning alive from Hades (2017, 185). To the audience, however, there would be a reasonable expectation that the hero would return and therefore they can recognize the paradoxical “living death” theme that Euripides returns to so often.¹⁸⁷

As with Alcestis and Iphigenia, the contrast between Heracles’ perceived death and his anticipated return emphasizes his mortal-divine liminality as well. Because Heracles is living as much as he is dead, and divine as much as he is mortal, the addresses by Amphitryon and Megara take on a semblance of prayer.¹⁸⁸ The lament sung by the chorus (348-440) also has a particularly hymnic quality (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 362). When Heracles does return, his report of what he did in Hades reiterates his ability to cross the boundaries of life and death, and his tendency toward divinity. He declares that he overpowered Cerberus in a fight (μάχη, 613), demonstrating that he crossed the boundary back to the living world by his own power rather

¹⁸⁷ For example, see the “living deaths” of Alcestis, Admetus, Iphigenia, and Orestes discussed in previous chapters.

¹⁸⁸ Lee notes that Megara never prays to an established divinity, but only to the presumed-dead Heracles (1980, 39). Papadopoulou sees in her address a hint of cult-heroization anticipating the cults Theseus will promise at the conclusion (2005, 46). Her request to him is paired with a prayer to Zeus by Amphitryon immediately after, further emphasizing its prayer-like qualities (498-501).

than (as *Amphitryon* suggests and some other traditions hold) as a gift from Persephone.¹⁸⁹ He next mentions that he saw the “secret rites of initiates” (τὰ μυστῶν δ’ ὄργι’, 613). This reference to the Eleusinian mysteries again contributes to the sense that Heracles has moved closer to divinity through his *katabasis*: having witnessed the greatest form of afterlife a mortal could hope for, he returns to life again and (as the audience is aware) moves toward an even greater afterlife through his *apotheosis*. Finally, Heracles not only returns from Hades himself, but also rescues another hero trapped in Hades, Theseus (619). The power to bring somebody from the dead is one closely associated with Heracles (as seen in *Alcestis* as well as the pre-existing mythology of Theseus’ rescue) but also strongly suggests divine power.¹⁹⁰

The chorus says as much when they celebrate the *katabasis* as proof of his parentage by Zeus: “Your old marriage-bed seems believable to me, Zeus... he has emerged from the earth’s chambers and left the home of Pluto below” (ὥς / πιστόν μοι τὸ παλαιὸν ἤδη λέχος, ὦ Ζεῦ... ὃς γὰρ ἐξέβας θαλάμων / Πλούτωνος δῶμα λιπὼν νέρτερον, 801-08). They also wish that the gods allow a return from death for good men: “If the gods had understanding and wisdom in men’s eyes... after dying (superior men) would go back to the light of the sun again in a double course” (εἰ δὲ θεοῖς ἦν ζύνεσις / καὶ σοφία κατ’ ἄνδρας... θανόντες / εἰς αὐγὰς πάλιν ἀλίου / δισσοῦς ἄν ἔβαν διαύλους, 655-662). Their wish is typically understood as a reference to Heracles as a ‘good man’ who has been granted a second lifetime of sorts with his successful return from Hades (Barlow 1996, 153). But Heracles returns to the living world without any apparent divine

¹⁸⁹ The tradition in which Heracles takes the dog in battle also sometimes includes battle against Hades himself, further setting Heracles on par with the gods (Bond 1981, 218).

¹⁹⁰ Shelton identifies the life/death boundary as “the most rigid” between mortals and gods; in crossing it, Heracles moves himself into the sphere of divinity (1979, 105).

help, and moreover restores Theseus from Hades as well. Heracles seems to be the giver, more than the recipient, of the gift the chorus wishes the gods would grant to good men. The chorus' emphasis on youth as a reward for good men also evokes the tradition that after his apotheosis Heracles marries Hebe, the goddess of youth (Meridor 1984, 206-07).

In the same triumphant celebration of Heracles' return, the chorus compares their praise of Heracles to paeans to Apollo before his temple:

παιᾶνα μὲν Δηλιάδες
 <ναῶν> ὕμνοῦσ' ἀμφὶ πύλας
 τὸν Λατοῦς εὐπαιδα γόνον,
 εἰλίσσουσαι καλλίχοροι·
 παιᾶνας δ' ἐπὶ σοῖς μελάθροις
 κύκνος ὧς γέρων ἀοιδὸς
 πολιᾶν ἐκ γενύων
 κελαδήσω· (687-94)

Delian girls sing a paean for the well-born son of Leto before the gates of his precinct, wheeling in fair dances; and I, an old poet, from grizzled jaw shall sing out paeans before your gates like a swan.

The parallel between Heracles and his palace, and Apollo and his sanctuary, suggest divine honors for Heracles; and as Parry notes the chorus conspicuously omits the traditional pious warnings that their subject is not a god (1965, 364).¹⁹¹ They continue to say that Heracles has “far exceeded his noble birth with his excellence” (τᾶς δ' εὐγενίας / πλέον ὑπερβάλλων <ἀρετᾶ>, 696-97). Given his dual paternity this can be read as an elevation from mortal son of Amphitryon to semi-divine son of Zeus; it also anticipates again the apotheosis that will transform Heracles from heroic demigod to Olympian god. The chorus continues its optimistic quasi-divinization of

¹⁹¹ Megara also compares the returning Heracles to a god, calling him “not at all lesser than Zeus Soter for you” (Διὸς / σωτῆρος ὑμῖν οὐδέν ἐσθ' ὄδ' ὕστερος, 521-22).

Heracles in the third stasimon, which celebrates divine justice with strong implications that Heracles is himself a divine instrument of that justice (735-814; Silk 1985, 13).

The heavy emphasis on Heracles' divine lineage and his great deeds for and with the gods early in the tragedy solidify his image as more than mortal, approaching divinity as is expected of him. The triumphant celebrations after his return to rescue his family set up a shocking shift in emotions when disaster falls on Heracles. But although triumph turns to horror and his fate seems entirely reversed, there are continued reminders of his divine aspects, his triumphs, and his intermediacy. The juxtaposition between these realities and the utter devastation his madness causes, contributes to the interpretive importance and difficulty of the final scene as he searches for resolution.

In the course of Heracles' madness his closeness to divinity continues to be affirmed. Iris, pronouncing from above the stage that the hero must be brought low, says that "the gods would be nothing, and mortality great, unless he pays the price" (ἦ θεοὶ μὲν οὐδαμοῦ, / τὰ θνητὰ δ' ἔσται μέγαρα, μὴ δόντος δίκην, 841-42). Lyssa counters that "he is not insignificant on earth or among the gods... he alone restored the honors of the gods" (οὐκ ἄσημος οὔτ' ἐπὶ χθονὶ / οὔτ' ἐν θεοῖσιν... / θεῶν ἀνέστησεν μόνος / τιμᾶς, 849-53). Though they refer to him as a mortal, and disagree on whether the hero should be punished, both equally acknowledge his greatness and his closeness to divinity. As he rampages against his family, Amphitryon and the chorus name Heracles only as the son of Zeus, emphasizing his semi-divine status even in the midst of his madness (Silk 1985, 14). The chorus also refers several times to Dionysus and Bacchic frenzy, a ritual experience of liminality and the divine (890, 892, 898). And in his madness Heracles believes himself to have divine power, possibly comparing himself to Poseidon with an obscure reference to a trident (Papadopoulou 2005, 47; Barlow 1996, 166).

Once the madness has passed neither Heracles nor others emphasize his divinity, except to reject it and contrast it with his current disgrace (Silk 1985, 14). But Heracles considers a suicide traditionally linked to his apotheosis (1151; Meridor 1984, 207). Theseus promises him cult sanctuaries and honors following his death (1331-33). And the altars of Zeus remain onstage as visible reminders of the hero's divine lineage. The near-divinity and glory of Heracles that dominated the first half of the tragedy linger in these reminders.

The Altars of Zeus

Two altars of Zeus are places of significance in *HF*, one unseen in the courtyard of the palace and the other prominently located in the orchestra.¹⁹² The tragedy opens with the Amphytrion, Megara, and the children of Heracles surrounding the altar of Zeus Soter outside the palace gates. The altar is a focal point for the action through the first half of the play: the suppliants are threatened with a quasi-sacrificial death at the altar, leave it to prepare for death inside the palace, and return to it in a sort of funeral procession. Heracles discovers them at the altar and leads them back inside the palace. Lycus returns to the altar to kill them, but instead follows Amphytrion inside where he meets his own end. Following the death of Lycus, however, attention shifts to inside the palace, where Heracles suffers his madness and slaughters his family. Here, too, the action centers around an altar to Zeus: the altar of Zeus Herkeios, guardian of the inner house (Barlow 1996, 166). The family begin purification rituals around the altar, it is there that the madness strikes, and one of the children hides and is killed there. So both on and

¹⁹² Rehm and Ley both argue convincingly for the altar of Zeus Soter being set well out into the *orchestra* and removed from the *skene* to facilitate the dramatic movements indicated in the text (1988, 302-03; 2010, 52-56).

off the stage, both publicly and privately, the drama of Heracles and his family play out in the shadow of his divine father Zeus and in an explicitly ritual context. The altars of Zeus provide a permanent physical representation of the ambiguous relationship of Heracles with his divine father, his own intermediate state between mortal and divine, and the complexities of relationships between mortals and gods.

Although characters recognize throughout *HF* that Zeus is the hero's father, god's altars represent a relationship between the two rooted in the same ritual structure as any other mortal-divine relationship. Amphitryon explains the origin of the Altar of Zeus Soter, which "my well-born son established as an ornament of his well-victorious spear when the Minyans were conquered" (ὄν καλλινίκου δορὸς ἄγαλμ' ἰδρύσατο / Μινύας κρατήσας οὐμὸς εὐγένης τόκος, 49-50). Though he names Zeus as father of Heracles numerous other times, Amphitryon does not discuss this relationship as a factor in the dedication of the altar. Rather he uses a cult title of the god as in typical practice. Mikalson notes that this specific aspect of Zeus refers to a prominent contemporary Athenian cult to Zeus Soter, commemorating their rescue in the Persian wars (1986, 90). Through their relationship to each other and their ritual connections to this altar, Heracles and Zeus mutually benefit each other. Heracles enjoys a public reminder of his mighty deeds and of his divine lineage; he also creates the opportunity to foster religious goodwill with a powerful god. Zeus receives cult honors and sacrifices as the divine patron of the commemorated victory, and shares in the glory of his son's success. Heracles' establishment of this altar and cult exemplifies traditional mortal piety and ritual relationship with a god.

The second altar of Zeus is simply referred to as the altar of Zeus without cult title (922). Scholars identify it as the altar of Zeus Herkeios because rites to purify the house would be performed here. The altar, located in the outer courtyard of a home, is an element of Greek

households familiar enough to the contemporary audience that it does not need to be named more specifically.¹⁹³ But the fact that it is an altar of Zeus encourages recognition of the parallel between the opening tableau onstage and the scene inside the house before the madness takes hold of Heracles. The family gathers around both altars, menaced by Lycus in the first instance and rescued by Heracles in the second. Just as disaster seems certain in the first scene and success in the second, Heracles disrupts and overturns the entire situation. These parallel interruptions by Heracles hold particular relevance to the question of his mortality or divinity, and his relationship with his divine father Zeus, not only because of the location of both altars to Zeus but also because of the divine associations of his circumstances and the ritual contexts of both scenes.

The opening scene of *HF* centers around the altar of Zeus Soter and the ritual act of supplication by Heracles' family at this altar.¹⁹⁴ Lycus threatens to kill them right on the altar in decidedly sacrificial language. He sends for wood to surround the altar so he can burn them there:

βωμὸν πέριξ νήσαντες ἀμφήρη ξύλα
 ἐμίμπρατ' αὐτῶν κάκτυροῦτε σώματα
 πάντων, ἴν' εἰδῶσ' οὐνεκ' οὐχ ὁ κατθανῶν
 κρατεῖ χθονὸς τῆσδ' ἀλλ' ἐγὼ τὰ νῦν τάδε. (243-46)

Heaping up the wood to be piled up around the altar, set it on fire and thoroughly burn all their bodies, so that they will know that the dead man does not rule this land, but I do now.

¹⁹³ Papadopoulou 2005, 12. Such rites might also take place at the home's hearth, which Amphytrion tells Heracles to greet (599) and where he tells Lycus Megara is seeking sanctuary (715). But the messenger specifically names the altar as Zeus'. Howe calls the altar of Zeus Herkeios "the cult center of the family around which evolved the ideas of kinship and morality" (1955, 294). For Zeus Herkeios see also Nillson 1925, 125 and 1940, 67.

¹⁹⁴ Sourvinou-Inwood identifies the supplication as providing a ritual structure to the first scene, supplemented by other religious references (2003, 361-62).

Lycus' threat reflects funerary ritual, the piled-up wood evoking a pyre; Megara continues this ritual link by asking to be allowed to dress her children for death (329).¹⁹⁵ When they return to the stage, processing to the altar in funeral clothing, the scene strongly evokes death rituals (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 362). But with the centrality of the altar of Zeus, the scene has an equally strong sense of perverted sacrifice. Megara makes this connotation plain in her first words after returning from the palace: "Who is the priest, who the slaughterer of these cursed ones? ... These sacrificial victims are prepared for you to lead to Hades" (τίς ἱερεύς, τίς σφαγεύς τῶν δυσπότημων; ...ἔτοιμ' ἄγειν τά θύματ' εἰς Ἄϊδου τάδε, 451-53). Σφαγεύς and θύματα are words closely associated with the specific rituals of animal sacrifice, and as in other references to human sacrifice the words would shock.¹⁹⁶ And the language of properly-ordered animal sacrifice at the beginning of the family's movement towards the altar invites the comparison of this procession with not only a funeral procession, but also one leading the sacrificial victims to the altar. Thus when Heracles appears shortly after, he interrupts what is clearly being portrayed as a "grossly impious act" (Barlow 1996, 135) and a mockery of two different ritual forms.

In contrast, the madness imposed by Lyssa interrupts a scene of idealized familial piety: Heracles and his family gather around the altar of Zeus Herkeios to perform purifications after Lykos is killed:

ἱερὰ μὲν ἦν πάροιθεν ἐσχάρας Διὸς
καθάρσι' οἴκων, γῆς ἄνακτ' ἐπεὶ κτανῶν
<ἐξέβαλε> τῶνδε δωμάτων Ἡρακλέης·
χορὸς δὲ καλλίμορφος εἰστήκει τέκνων

¹⁹⁵ Like Alcestis, Megara attempts to take a modicum of control over her own death, and that of her children, by participating in the death rituals. Her funeral rites do not proceed as far as Alcestis', as she and the others are rescued before her death. But her ritual act does provide the delay necessary for Heracles to arrive and save them.

¹⁹⁶ Barlow 1996, 145; Bond 1981, 180.

πατήρ τε Μεγάρα τ', ἐν κύκλῳ δ' ἤδη κανοῦν
 εἴλικτο βωμοῦ, φθέγμα δ' ὅσιον εἴχομεν.
 μέλλων δὲ δαλὸν χειρὶ δεξιᾷ φέρειν,
 ἐς χέρνιβ' ὡς βάψειεν, Ἀλκμήνης τόκος
 ἔστι σιωπῆ.

(922-30)

There were sacred rites before the hearth-altar of Zeus for the house's purification, after Heracles had killed the country's master and thrown him out of this house. The beautifully arranged group of children stood there, and his father and Megara; the basket had already been taken in a circle around the altar, and we were suspending sacred speech. But when he was about to take a torch in his right hand, to dip it in the holy water, the son of Alcmena stood in silence.

The scene is one of familiar, proper ritual. In contrast to the violent, perverted sacrifice Lycus threatens against Heracles' family, the hero leads a peaceful and properly ordered rite of purification. He has already declared his intentions to follow the norms of piety to Hestia and his household gods (606-09) but Euripides sets the second reversal specifically at the inner altar of Zeus. This religious context emphasizes the parallel between Lycus and Heracles as threats to the family at the altar of Zeus, the non-responsiveness of Zeus to his worshippers and descendants, and the semi-divinity of Heracles as the son of Zeus.¹⁹⁷ The same household altar is also the site of Eurydice's suicide in *Antigone* and, as Rehm notes, the altar's violation symbolizes the destruction of the family (1994, 66). This symbolism is all the more meaningful in *HF*, where the family of a son of Zeus is destroyed at the foot of his father's altar.

Euripides continues to accentuate the altar in the messenger's account of how Heracles slaughters his family. As he draws his bow to attack his children, one of them "crouched beneath the altar like a bird" (ἄλλος δὲ βωμὸν ὄρνις ὡς ἔπτηξ' ὕπο, 974). After killing another of his sons Heracles turns on this one, "who had crouched at the base of the altar thinking he might remain

¹⁹⁷ For parallels between Lycus' attempted slaughter and Heracles' madness see Shelton 1979, 103 and 105; and Papadopoulou 2005, 27-28.

unseen” (ὄς ἀμφὶ βωμίαν / ἔπηξε κρηπίδ’ ὡς λεληθέναι δοκῶν, 984-85). The boy supplicates his father at the altar, echoing the supplication to Zeus at the beginning of the play. The messenger also refers to the final son as a “third sacrifice” (τρίτον θῦμ’, 995), parallel to Megara’s earlier speech and emphasizing the closeness of Heracles’ murders to the altar. Thus, having interrupted one perverted sacrifice, Heracles begins a proper ritual but interrupts that as well to complete another perverted sacrifice, all at the altars of his father Zeus.¹⁹⁸

When the madness passes Amphitryon and the slaves bind the sleeping Heracles to a broken column. In this position, surrounded by the bodies of his family, he is rolled onto the stage on the *ekkyklema*. References by the messenger, the chorus, and Heracles all attest to the presence of at least one broken column brought out as well, since Heracles is still bound to it (1009-12, 1035-38, 1094-97).¹⁹⁹ As the altar of Zeus Herkeios features prominently in the slaughter of his family, I argue that the altar or some representation of it would also be brought out on the *ekkyklema* as part of the tableau. There is no indication that the bodies of the children have been moved: they are killed; Athena strikes down Heracles; the household binds him to a pillar; the messenger emerges, then the bloody scene follows. The chorus describes the corpses as “wretched children lying before their unlucky father” (τέκνα πρὸ πατρὸς / ἄθλια κείμενα δυστάνου, 1032-33). Amphitryon later refers to them as *πεσήματα*, not just corpses but the “falling” of their bodies, implying that their bodies lie where they fell (1131). As the murders happen in the context of a ritual at the altar and Heracles kills one of his sons as he cowers by the

¹⁹⁸ Sourvinou-Inwood notes that Heracles’ murder of his family is perverted even in comparison to other human sacrifices, since it does not adhere to the usual sacrificial rituals (2003, 367).

¹⁹⁹ Bond suggests that these explicit references may be intended to aid the audience in recognizing an unclear prop as the column (1981, 330).

altar base, a complete scene of the slaughter should include the altar itself.²⁰⁰ Even if it is not present however, the messenger account should help solidify to the audience that the entire display is located in the immediate vicinity of the altar.

At the time of the *ekkyklema*'s appearance, then, the Altar of Zeus Soter remains where it has been onstage the entire time, likely in a prominent spot at the center of the orchestra. Especially if the Altar of Zeus Herkeios is included in the tableau, Heracles and the bloody pile of corpses provide an emphatic visual response to the opening scene. The group who surrounded one altar, living but in danger of death, now surround the other, dead. The two altars onstage together provide a visual summary of the tragedy's progression from threat to victory to disaster, a contrast between Heracles' former glories and his current disgrace, and a doubled reminder of Zeus' complete absence during his son's downfall. Every important event within the play occurs before an altar to Heracles' divine father. Holmes reads Heracles' own body as a site for exploring the divide between divine and mortal; similarly, the altar embodies the ambiguities and dangers of interacting across that divide (2008, *passim*). Indeed, the presence of the altar onstage

²⁰⁰ The size of the altar might be a logistical barrier to its appearance onstage; however, as a domestic altar it would be significantly smaller than a monumental altar and could be represented by something even smaller for the purposes of the stage machinery. Additionally, there are other examples of dramas in which the *ekkyklema* may convey quite a sizeable scene onstage. Aristophanes *Acharnians* and *Thesmophoriazusai* reveal tragedians with their wardrobes and numerous props on the platform; Socrates' school may enter the stage on the *ekkyklema* in *Clouds* (Amati 2008, 47). Dover identifies this as problematic, both because the platform would be unable to hold so much and because the *skene* door would have to be very large to allow it to fit through. He suggests stage hands helping by bringing some of the props onstage along with the *ekkyklema* (1972, 25). I see no reason, however, that the Athenians would have struggled to construct a platform or a door capable of permitting such a scene from being presented. At any rate, the tableau revealed in *HF* must include at minimum one actor, one broken column, and four corpses – a significantly larger scene than Dover seems to believe possible. There is also a sizable scene revealed in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*: the Pythia emerges from the temple and describes Orestes on the Delphic *omphalos* and the Furies seated before him, asleep (40-47). This scene is then revealed, likely on the *ekkyklema*. Even if only a representative few Furies are included in this tableau the platform would need to be fairly sizeable; and there is at least a possibility that the scene also included a physical representation of the *omphalos* on which Orestes is said to be lying. For a thorough discussion of this scene and its relationship to the development of the *ekkyklema* see Ley 2010, 40-41.

with the corpses surrounding it would contribute a great deal of power to the final scene, in which Heracles explicitly rejects Zeus as his father and the Olympians as gods. It adds emphasis to Heracles' declarations: he chooses Amphitryon as father over Zeus who is represented by the altar onstage; he (with the help of Theseus) rejects the notion of polluting the gods before an altar still visibly polluted with the murders of a wife and children; he declares that the gods are no gods at all if they behave thus, still standing before the altar he erected in worship of one such god. The altar provides a visual irony to the final rejection, as its gory appearance affirms that the gods do act in this way, and yet are gods.

The Deus ex Machina

While Zeus is constantly present in *HF* through his altars onstage and within the house, the god himself never appears. The marked absence of any action by Zeus on behalf of his son and grandsons dominates the play thematically. In contrast, the presence and actions of three other gods shape the tragedy more directly. Iris and Lyssa arrive onstage much in the manner of a concluding *deus ex machina*, but at the midpoint of the play rather than its end. Their appearance and the madness incited by Lyssa halt the triumph of the first half's ending and begin the terror of the second half; rather than resolve the conflicts of the play, they create new confusion and violence. They are also minor deities acting not for their own purposes but in the service of Hera. In contrast, Athena intervenes without the formal markings of a *deus ex machina*; in fact, she does not appear onstage or speak at all. She halts the violence, but in an unusually physical way, by striking the mad Heracles with a stone rather than commanding him to stop as is typical. Again unlike the actions typical of gods at the end of tragedies, she does not

stay to offer any explanations, consolations, or promises for the future. She disappears as abruptly as she appears, and leaves Heracles and his companions to sort out the aftermath.

Dramatically speaking the appearance of Iris and Lyssa is quite unusual. Gods in Euripidean tragedy often speak a prologue or appear at the play's end to provide resolution. Among his extant texts, only *Heracles* includes gods appearing for the first time in the play's middle.²⁰¹ Apart from the timing within the play, however, the arrival of the two gods follows much of Euripidean convention for divine appearances *ex machina*. The gods appear high above the stage; those who see them express fear as they announce their appearance: "Oh, oh! Have we reached the same onslaught of fear, old men, at such a phantom as I see above the house? Flee, flee" (ἔα ἔα / ἄρ' ἐς τὸν αὐτὸν πίτυλον ἤκομεν φόβου, / γέροντες, οἷον φάσμ' ὑπὲρ δόμων ὀρῶ; / φυγῆ φυγῆ, 815-18). The gods reassure the chorus, identify themselves, and explain their purpose: "Take courage, old men, you see here the offspring of Night, Lyssa; and me, Iris, servant of the gods. We have brought no harm against the city, but are making an attack on the house of one man" (θαρσεῖτε Νυκτὸς τήνδ' ὀρῶντες ἔκγονον / Λύσσαν, γέροντες, κάμῃ τὴν θεῶν λάτρην / Ἴριν· πόλει γὰρ οὐδὲν ἤκομεν βλάβος, / ἐνὸς δ' ἐπ' ἀνδρὸς δώματα στρατεύομεν, 822-25). They emphasize necessity and the importance of following the divine will: "Necessity kept him safe" (τὸ χρὴ νιν ἐξέσωζεν, 828); "Do not weigh in on the contrivances of Hera and myself" (μὴ σὺ νουθέτει τά τ' Ἥρας κάμῃ μηχανήματα, 855). And once it has been demanded, obedience is quickly given: "If I must assist Hera and you and it is a necessity, I will go" (εἰ δὲ δή μ' Ἥρα θ' ὑπουργεῖν σοί τ' ἀναγκαίως ἔχει, / εἰμί γ', 859-61).

²⁰¹ Dionysus dominates the stage throughout *Bacchae* but appears first in the prologue; his role in that play will be treated in its own chapter. Athena also appears in the middle of *Rhesus*, but I accept the prevailing opinion that the play is not Euripidean; for an overview of the question of its authenticity, see Liapis 2017, 343-44.

The initial entrance, the fear of the chorus and the first announcement of Iris, are all familiar variations on the typical *deus ex machina*. The choruses in *Electra* and *Andromache* likewise express shock and wonder at a god's appearance, as do the title characters in both *Ion* and *Hippolytus*. *Ion* suggests flight as does the chorus here.²⁰² In nearly every instance of a *deus ex machina* in Euripides the god introduces themselves immediately as do Iris and Lyssa here.²⁰³ And several gods order those onstage to cease from fear, sadness, or anger.²⁰⁴ Additionally the sight of the two goddesses, either standing on top of the stage roof or *ex machina*, visually links the scene to a frequent type of Euripidean ending.

The audience, however, would also be aware that the timing is off. Too little time has passed and too little action has occurred onstage for Iris and Lyssa to be giving final resolution. And as Iris' speech continues, it becomes clear that their appearance is less typical than it first seems. She commands that something specific be done, as many concluding gods do. However, her instructions are addressed not at the mortals onstage but at the goddess Lyssa standing beside her. Her directions contain elements similar to those used by gods above the stage to the mortals they address. She exhorts Lyssa: "But come stir up your unsoftening heart, maiden daughter of dark Night, and send madness against this man" (ἀλλ' εἴ' ἄτεγκτον συλλαβοῦσα καρδίαν, / Νυκτὸς κελαινῆς ἀνυμέναιε παρθένε, / μανίας τ' ἐπ' ἀνδρὶ τῷδε...ἔλαυνε, 833-37). She emphasizes the importance of the divine order: "the gods will be worth nothing, and mortality

²⁰² *El.* 1233-37; *Andr.* 1226-30; *Ion* 1549-52; *Hipp.* 1391-93. In *Ion* and *Hippolytus* the same exclamation, ἔα, begins the line; in *Ion*, the similar ἰὼ is used in *Andromache*. In *Electra* no exclamation is uttered.

²⁰³ The exception is that Artemis does not introduce herself by name in *Hippolytus*, because Hippolytus has already identified her.

²⁰⁴ Thetis tells Peleus not to be upset at his misfortunes (*Andr.* 1232-33); Apollo tells Menelaus to hold back his ill temper (*Or.* 1625); the Dioskouroi tell Theoklymenos to restrain his anger (*Hel.* 1642).

will be great, unless he pays the price” (ἢ θεοὶ μὲν οὐδαμοῦ, / τὰ θμητὰ δ’ ἔσται μεγάλα, μὴ δόντος δίκην 841-42). It is to Lyssa that (as previously quoted) she invokes necessity and a god’s plans as justification for her orders. And Lyssa, though unwilling, is compelled by divine authority to submit and obey. The fact that Iris and Lyssa are minor gods sent by Hera and that Iris commands Lyssa makes their appearance far more complex than the typical divine appearance. Euripides stages the details of how the divine plan is negotiated between gods. Heracles, however, is unaware of any of this; the audience enjoys a fuller understanding of the situation than the hero, who will have to come to terms with his madness without this understanding.

Heracles is not the only Euripidean tragedy in which two divinities appear together *ex machina*; the Dioskouroi appear together in *Electra* (1238ff.) and *Helen* (1642ff.), and Apollo appears with a divinized Helen in *Orestes* (1625ff.).²⁰⁵ Helen is silent in her appearance, while the Dioskouroi address the stage in unison and do not converse with one another, much less disagree. Only in *HF* are gods depicted in a dispute onstage (Lee 1980, 41). Castor and Polydeuces do hint at some disagreement with the will of Zeus and the oracle of Apollo; but they do not address their objections directly to these gods or urge them to change their minds, as Lyssa does with Iris.²⁰⁶ Even the objections Lyssa raises are not aimed at Iris directly, but rather

²⁰⁵ The evidence in the text for Helen’s appearance here is limited, as she is silent; but Menelaus does address her. I accept the conclusions of Dunn that she does appear (1996, 160 and 225-6 n.3).

²⁰⁶ “Phoebus – but I am silent, for he is my lord: he may be wise but he did not proclaim wise things to you” (Φοῖβος - ἀλλ’ ἀναξ γὰρ ἐστ’ ἐμός, / σιγῶ· σοφὸς δ’ ὢν οὐκ ἔχρησέ σοι σοφά, *El.* 1245-46). “Before this we would have rescued our sister long ago, since Zeus has made us gods; but we were weaker than what had been fated, and also weaker than the gods to whom it seemed best for it to be thus” (πάλαι δ’ ἀδελφὴν κἂν πρὶν ἐξεσώσαμεν, / ἐπεὶ περ ἡμᾶς Ζεὺς ἐποίησεν θεούς· / ἀλλ’ ἦσσαν’ ἦμεν τοῦ πεπρωμένου θ’ ἅμα / καὶ τῶν θεῶν, οἷς ταῦτ’ ἔδοξεν ᾧδ’ ἔχειν, *Hel.* 1658-61).

her mistress Hera; but the confrontation is far more direct and Iris has the authority to respond on behalf of Hera. Lyssa, with no choice but to submit to the divine authority beyond her ability to sway, seems to have more in common with the mortals who invariably assent to the commands of a *deus ex machina* than with the gods uttering those commands. Menelaus abandons his pursuit of Orestes because “it is necessary to obey” (πειθεσθαι χρεών, *Or.* 1679); Theoklymenos lets Helen return home “if it seems best to the gods” (εἰ θεοῖς δοκεῖ, *Hel.* 1683); Thoas lets Orestes and Iphigenia leave Tauris since “whoever listens to the words of the gods and does not obey, is not thinking straight” (τοῖσι τῶν θεῶν λόγοις / ὅστις κλύων ἄπιστος, οὐκ ὀρθῶς φρονεῖ, *IT.* 1475-76). None of the gods’ addressees express any real agreement with divine commands or indicate that the resolution is pleasing to them. Rather, they respond that they have no choice but to obey. Likewise Lyssa, though she feels free to object more directly to the commands of Hera, ultimately has no say and must obey the directions spoken by Iris high above the stage.

The staged disagreement between Iris and Lyssa vividly illustrates the complexities of divine and mortal relationships in the world of Euripidean tragedy. There is no uniformity of divine will, and fate is enigmatic and ill-understood even by the gods. Different divinities pursue their own ends as much as they are able, and exert what power they have over other gods. Lesser gods, though divine, must concede to the will of those greater than them. Iris and Lyssa both to Hera, and Lyssa as a chthonic god to Iris as representative of Olympians. (Lefkowitz 2016, 50). As when Euripides depicts mortals who have transcended mortality in some way and can now interact with the gods on a higher level, this interaction blurs the perceived boundaries between mortal and divine. It suggests that the divide may not be as sharp as we may expect, and that there is a good deal of intermediate space. Lyssa, though divine, is herself intermediate to a degree because of her subjection to the Olympians; so perhaps it is no surprise that she identifies

with Heracles, the epitome of intermediacy between mortal and divine.²⁰⁷ Lyssa's defense of Heracles is read by some as positive proof of the hero's innocence (Barlow 1996, 8) and by others as a negative association that would detract from the audience's opinion of him (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 366). There is no clear answer, and more than anything the disagreement encourages ongoing questions about justice, divine order, and Heracles' guilt or innocence. Additionally, the disagreement between these two gods over Hera's wishes takes place above the altar of Zeus Soter still standing in the orchestra. His altar serves as a reminder of another divine will opposed, as Iris suggests, to Hera's goal. The chorus, and by extension the audience, are exposed to a glimpse of the complexities of what divine messengers often gloss over as "necessity" or "divine will."

Since Iris and Lyssa appear in the center of the play, they do not provide the resolution typically expected of gods *ex machina*. In fact, they reverse the resolution seemingly achieved by Heracles when he returns from Hades with quasi-divine attributes to rescue his family. They create chaos which must be stopped by another god, Athena, who appears briefly offstage to strike Heracles with a stone and end his rampage. Like concluding gods appearing *ex machina*, she abruptly cuts off an imminent act of violence; but unlike them, she appears at ground-level and does not speak at all. She provides no explanations, consolations, or instructions for how to proceed. Her abrupt departure and her silence emphasize the lack of divine resolution in *HF*. Iris and Lyssa sow chaos rather than bringing resolution; Athena ends it but does nothing more. After

²⁰⁷ Silk suggests this identification is because Lyssa as madness personified represents Heracles' particular madness as much as the general condition; and that Heracles' madness is an element of Heracles' intermediacy between mortal and divine (1985, 17). But even an external divinity Lyssa, by her own position in the divine cosmos, represents this same intermediacy that Heracles experiences.

she leaves the tragedy continues, drawing out the devastation of the play's events as the mortal characters attempt to come to terms with them unassisted.

Theseus arrives seemingly in place of a divine appearance, and provides the final consolations and promises for future cult that Iris and Lyssa do not. On the whole scholars emphasize that he is not comparable to a *deus ex machina*.²⁰⁸ He does not hold the kind of authority over Heracles that make a *deus ex machina* such an effective vehicle for plot resolution. Nor does he, like Orestes or Medea, appear above the stage in a clear visual reference to the divine conclusions. However, in many ways his role parallels these divine appearances, with alterations appropriate to the difference in status (Dunn 1996, 118). Theseus does not appear above the stage and his appearance is not accompanied by the expressions of shock and fear typical of a divine epiphany. However, because Heracles veils himself before Theseus draws near there is a second "appearance" of Theseus when he removes his cloak. Theseus commands him authoritatively to unveil his head: "I order you to show your face to your friends" (αὐδῶ φίλοισιν ὄμμα δεικνύναι τὸ σόν, 1215). αὐδῶ is not a command exclusive to gods, but it appears in several *deus ex machina* scenes in reference to the god's commands.²⁰⁹ Heracles does not voice any fear, but he resists his friend's appearance with a gesture and Theseus dismisses his worry: "Why are you signaling fear with a shake of your hand? ...It doesn't matter to me" (τί μοι προσείων χεῖρα σημαίνεις φόβον; ...οὐδὲν μέλει μοι, 1218-20). And he attempts to explain the

²⁰⁸ Lee rejects the idea outright (1980, 42); Silk calls him a "*homo ex machina*" largely in reference to the arbitrariness of his appearance (1985, 16); Michelini notes that he is more involved in the play itself than a *deus ex machina* (1988, 258). Dunn comes the closest to considering it, calling Theseus a "*deus manqué*," who parallels the appearance of a *deus ex machina* but lacks the effectiveness that comes with it (1996, 117-21).

²⁰⁹ Artemis (*Hipp.* 1285), Athena, (*IT* 1447), and the Dioskouroi (*Hel.* 1662) address it to the mortals they are commanding; Ion (*Ion* 1483) asks what Phoebus commands.

current situation by invoking fate: “Nobody among mortals, or the gods, is untouched by the fates” (οὐδεις δὲ θνητῶν ταῖς τύχαις ἀκήρατος, / οὐ θεῶν, 1314-15).

Theseus also gives Heracles clear instructions about what he must do next, beginning with ritual obligations and proceeding to provisions for his future life and promises of cult commemoration after death:

Θήβας μὲν οὖν ἔκλειπε τοῦ νόμου χάριν,
 ἔπου δ’ ἄμ’ ἡμῖν πρὸς πόλισμα Παλλάδος.
 ἐκεῖ χέρας σὰς ἀγνίσας μιάσματος
 δόμους τε δώσω χρημάτων τ’ ἐμῶν μέρος
 ... θανόντα δ’, εὗτ’ ἂν εἰς Ἅιδου μόλης,
 θυσίασι λαίνοισί τ’ ἐξογκώμασιν
 τίμιον ἀνάξει πᾶσ’ Ἀθηναίων πόλις. (1322-25, 31-33)

So then leave Thebes because of the law, and follow me to the city of Pallas. There when you have purified hands of their pollution I will give you homes and a share of my wealth...and when you are dead, and have gone to Hades, the whole city of Athenians will lift you up as honorable with sacrifices and stone monuments.

The promise of the hero-cult is particularly significant both for Theseus and for Heracles.

Heracles, of course, is known to the audience as the “hero-god” and future Olympian. His contemporary cult at Athens celebrates both the chthonic and the Olympian aspects of Heracles, so the audience would reasonably expect the cults promised by Theseus to adhere to this double-natured worship. Theseus, however, assumes his friend will go to Hades after his death.²¹⁰ The rituals his promises for Heracles are those that a mortal hero can offer to his equal. But with the anticipated apotheosis they would be transformed along with the new god they honor. So

²¹⁰ For the details of Heracleian cult at Athens see Shapiro (1983, 13). Dunn argues that the vagueness of the promised rites and the Olympian features of Heracles’ contemporary cult signal an ‘erasure’ of Theseus’ promised cult rather than an elevation of it (1996, 118). With Sourvinou-Inwood, I think it more likely that the audience would link their experience of Heracleian cult with Theseus’ promise rather than dismiss it (2003, 371-72).

Theseus, by his religious actions on behalf of Heracles, gains an Olympian ally and legitimizes his role as quasi-*deus ex machina*.

Theseus is Heracles' true peer, a hero with double paternity (Poseidon in his case) who has recently returned from Hades. Even in the specifics of their intermediacy, they are of equal status.²¹¹ This is unlike the typical *deus ex machina*, but more similar to the appearance of Iris and Lyssa earlier in the play, in which Iris demands the obedience of Lyssa despite Lyssa's objections. And as the unusual staging of two gods on the *machina* together provided a more complex view of divine wills than the typical epiphany, here the similarity in status between the two men leads to a more thorough, if less tidy, resolution to the tragedy. Though Theseus cites fate and instructs Heracles, his friend is free to speak his grievances against the gods, disagree with his view of divinity, and resist his commands. Enough speech is exchanged between the two that it is considered as much like an *agon* as it is like a *deus ex machina* scene.²¹² When gods conclude tragedies from above, they sometimes command the mortal addressee not to be angry, and the mortal has no choice but to obey. Here, on the contrary, Heracles has the opportunity to discuss his suffering at length, and attempt to make sense of the world in the context of this suffering.

Theseus also differs from a *deus ex machina* in his physical closeness to and involvement with Heracles. He dismisses concerns about being polluted several times (1219-20, 1234, 1399-

²¹¹ His quasi-divinity is not vaunted as Heracles' was in the first section of *HF*, but he and Heracles both emphasize their kinship and friendship (1154, 1215, 1234, 1398, 1403, 1425).

²¹² As with the *deus ex machina* comparison, though, the scene does not meet the formal expectations of a true *agon*. Rather than a single long speech by each side here there are two speeches for each speaker, those by Theseus being shorter than the responses by Heracles. A section of stichomythia in between two of the speeches further distances the scene from the typical form. Atypical also is that the participants, though they disagree here, consider each other friends (Barlow 1996, 175-76).

1400), unlike several gods who mention their inability to come too near the mortals for fear of pollution.²¹³ This first has the effect of engendering a sense of closeness and friendship between the two men. Eventually, it also allows Theseus to help Heracles find resolution in a concrete way. He does not merely instruct Heracles to leave Thebes and seek purification at Athens, but literally supports his weakened friend as he hobbles away from his home:

Θη. ἀνίστασ', ὦ δύστηνε· δακρύων ἄλις.
 Ηρ. οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην· ἄρθρα γὰρ πέπηγέ μου...
 Θη. παῦσαι· δίδου δὲ χεῖρ' ὑπηρέτη φίλω.
 Ηρ. ἀλλ' αἶμα μὴ σοῖς ἐξομόρξωμαι πέπλοις.
 Θη. ἔκμασσε, φείδου μηδέν...
 Θη. δίδου δέρη σὴν χεῖρ', ὀδηγήσω δ' ἐγώ. (1394-1402)

Th: Stand up, o wretched man; enough tears.
 H: I cannot. For my joints have grown stiff...
 Th: Stop. Give your hand to the friend in your service.
 H: But I am afraid I would wipe blood on your robes.
 Th: Wipe it, do not hold back...
 Th: Put your hand on my neck, and I will lead you.

Theseus has already given Heracles his instructions, and Heracles has assented. At this point a *deus ex machina* would have left the stage and the play would have concluded in short order. Instead, here Theseus remains with Heracles and helps him both with encouragement and with physical assistance to begin his journey. The vivid physical descriptions in the text emphasize the importance of Theseus as an equal and supporter of Heracles, rather than a distant god. He is able and willing to ignore the blood, dismiss concerns of pollution, and support the weight of his friend's body as he walks away. A god, separated by the stage machinery as well as by the threat of pollution, could not do so.

²¹³ Apollo leaves the house of Admetus (*Alc.* 22-23), Aphrodite leaves Hippolytus (*Hipp.* 1438), and the Dioskouroi allow only the unpolluted to approach (*El.* 1294).

The actual divine appearances in *Heracles* are unusual, incomplete, and revealing of additional complexity within the divine force behind events. Heracles, as a still-mortal hero, is powerless against Iris and Lyssa; but they are also subject to the will of gods above them. Theseus' appearance at the tragedy's conclusion parallels the typical Euripidean *machina* scene to some extent but does not fully replicate or replace a concluding divine appearance. However, Theseus does perform some of the functions expected of a god above the stage and share enough characteristics to suggest an interplay between divine and mortal roles in tragedy. There is no clear dichotomous rejection of divine assistance in favor of mortal resolution; rather, Euripides opens up a more flexible spectrum of action and authority in which interventions by the gods are shown to be insufficient or problematic, and mortals with elements of divine status and authority supplement the gods' actions to accomplish a resolution that is lacking after the gods have departed. Like Heracles in *Alcestitis*, Theseus arrives as a mortal with special status and is able to provide closure where the gods do not. But while Heracles and Theseus are unable to comprehend the workings of the divine plan and turn to each other for human companionship in the face of seeming divine indifference, this same divine plan reinforces the flexibility of the divine will and the potential for Heracles' future immortality.

Criticizing and Rejecting the Gods

When Heracles and the others begin to find words for what has happened, they turn first to Zeus as a responsible party, even while they recognize Hera as the instigator. The chorus asks Zeus "why did you hate your own son with such excessive cruelty, and lead him to this sea of evils? (τί παῖδ' ἤχθηρας ᾧδ' ὑπερκότως / τὸν σόν, κακῶν δὲ πέλαγος ἐς τόδ' ἤγαγες; 1087-88). Amphytrion challenges him: "alongside Hera's throne do you see these things?" (παρ' Ἡρας ἄρ'

ὄρᾱς θρόνων τάδε; 1127). Heracles charges that his father “conceived me as an enemy for Hera” (πολέμιόν μ’ ἐγένετο Ἥρα, 1263-64). These accusations go beyond Amphitryon’s complaints at the altar of Zeus Soter earlier in the tragedy. Those criticize Zeus for neglecting his son’s family (339-48, 498-501); and Heracles’ unexpected return to rescue his family seems at first to prove Amphitryon wrong (Padilla 1994, 294). Now the criticism is renewed and intensified. He and the others portray Zeus as actively complicit in his wife Hera’s campaign against him. The image of Zeus watching from beside Hera’s throne especially paints a picture of him submitting to his wife’s plan rather than asserting his own.²¹⁴ These charges against Zeus anticipate the broader problem of divine justice and the behavior of the gods that Heracles is about to address.

The bulk of the speech about the (mis)behavior of the gods comes in the context of the *agon* between Theseus and Heracles near the tragedy’s conclusion. Heracles broaches the subject in his first speech, delineating the ways in which Zeus and Hera have wronged him. He begins with a prayer formula to verbally attack Zeus, “whoever Zeus is” (ὅστις ὁ Ζεὺς, 1263). The phrase itself is pious, a concession to divinity’s superior knowledge and an attempt to draw on whatever form of address will most please the god.²¹⁵ In context, however, the pious words take a hostile implication. As Bond says, it is intentionally shocking (1981, 383-84). Heracles does not continue with any recognizable prayer as this line would imply, but instead accuses Zeus of creating him to suffer at Hera’s hands and rejects him as his father altogether: “but you, old man, do not be grieved; for I regard you as my father in place of Zeus” (σὸ μέντοι μηδὲν ἀχθεσθῆς,

²¹⁴ I do not see, as Bond suggests, an allusion to a sexual act with Zeus in Hera’s lap (1981, 353). But the mention of only Hera’s throne and not Zeus’ shifts the authority to her. Amphitryon makes it seem as if Zeus is not only sharing his power with her, as Michelini reads it (1988, 270), but ceding it to her.

²¹⁵ Michelini 1988, 256; Lefkowitz 1989, 72. See similar lines in Aesch. *Ag.* 160-66 and Eur. *Tro.* 884-89; in Eur. *Or.* 418 it is similarly hostile to its use here.

γέρον· / πατέρα γὰρ ἀντὶ Ζηνὸς ἠγοῦμαι σ' ἐγώ, 1264-65). This is the beginning of a series of declarations by Heracles that seem to reject or deny the mythology of the Greek gods, including his own legend.

Heracles ends this speech with his strongest words against Hera, again drawing on recognizably religious speech and imagery:

χορευέτω δὴ Ζηνὸς ἢ κλεινὴ δάμαρ
 †κρόουσ' Ὀλυμπίου Ζηνὸς ἀρβύλη πόδα.†
 ἔπραξε γὰρ βούλησιν ἦν ἐβούλετο
 ἄνδρ' Ἑλλάδος τὸν πρῶτον αὐτοῖσιν βάθροισ
 ἄνω κάτω στρέψασα. τοιαύτη θεῶ
 τίς ἂν προσεύχοιθ'; ἢ γυναικὸς οὔνεκα
 λέκτρων φθονοῦσα Ζηνὶ τοὺς εὐεργέτας
 Ἑλλάδος ἀπώλεσ' οὐδὲν ὄντας αἰτίους. (1303-10)

“Let the renowned wife of Zeus dance, pounding her foot in its sandal [of Olympian Zeus]. For she accomplished the purpose she had intended, turning the first man of Greece upside-down to his foundation. Who could pray to such a goddess? In her jealousy against Zeus because of a woman’s bed she destroyed the benefactors of Greece though they were guilty of nothing.²¹⁶

He presents here an unflattering image of the goddess spitefully dancing to celebrate her triumph over an innocent house. Most strikingly he asks how anybody could pray to a goddess like her, inspiring a great deal of discussion in readers across centuries about perceived atheistic or anti-theistic sentiment. Like Heracles rejects Zeus as his father, he also rejects Hera as a goddess to be prayed to. But his own attack against her maintains the religious framework of prayer that defines mortal and divine interactions. He addresses her in a 3rd-person imperative and acknowledges her victories over her enemies; even the image of her dance draws on ritual vocabulary, *χορευέτω*, and evokes a traditional image of dancing gods (Michelini 1987, 271).

²¹⁶ For the textual difficulties in 1304 see Barlow 1996, 179. The repetition of Ζηνὸς from the previous line immediately indicates that the line is corrupt.

Heracles' intent is hostile. But the criticism is itself a form of prayer that, like the altars of Zeus and the semi-divine person of Heracles, reaffirm the divinities in question.²¹⁷

His words against the gods culminate with a statement about divinity that functions as a sort of anti-prayer: “a god, if he is truly a god, needs nothing” (δεῖται γὰρ ὁ θεός, εἴπερ ἔστ’ ὀρθῶς θεός, / οὐδενός, 1345-46). Heracles essentially rejects the mutual interactions between mortals and gods in prayer, sacrifice, and other religious actions. He does not necessarily mean these things are fictitious – his own person, the altars to his father Zeus, his time fighting alongside the gods and performing supernatural labors, and his experience of Hera's wrath all speak to his knowledge that the gods are real and behave exactly as they are thought to behave.²¹⁸ This contradiction has led to a wide variety of interpretations trying to reconcile Heracles' words with the content of the tragedy. Many 20th-century scholars find his words to be evidence of the impiety of Euripides, an extra-dramatic, editorial comment by the tragedian meant not to be understood in the context of the tragedy, but to signal to his audience that the traditional gods did not exist or were immoral.²¹⁹ More recent scholarship tries to distance itself from this view by proposing other readings: some argue that Heracles' words are an idealistic wish or an outburst of grief and despair, not meant to be taken literally.²²⁰ Others see them as a

²¹⁷ Mikalson points out that nowhere in *HF* does any character offer any prayer to Hera (1986, 95). This speech by Heracles, critical as it is, is ironically the sole religious acknowledgement of her in the tragedy.

²¹⁸ The appearance of Lyssa and Iris additionally affirms to the audience the literal reality of the divine in the world of *HF* (Lefkowitz 1989, 81-82). Heracles does not witness their epiphany, so there is an element of discrepant awareness between him and the audience. But his own existence and experiences up to this point are hardly lacking encounters with the divine; his statement can hardly be taken as literal disbelief.

²¹⁹ Among these are Lesky (1972, 380), Brown (1978, 24-25), Mikalson (1986, 97), Michelini (1987, 274-76), Halleran (1986, 179-81).

²²⁰ See for example Lefkowitz (2016, 54-55), Mastronarde (1986, 208)

new recognition of the distance and foreignness of divinity: gods should not be expected to act like mortals or adhere to a mortal sense of justice.²²¹ And some attempt more creative solutions that allow the reality within the tragedy to be shifted or re-written along with Heracles' statement.²²²

While these readings of *HF* have a great deal of merit, I believe that they make the situation more complicated than it was intended to be. Heracles' denial of the gods' behavior as Theseus describes it is not an isolated exclamation, but the final one of a series of attacks on gods he now considers his enemies. He deliberately uses the form of prayers and the idea of ritual interaction as weapons to strike back at the gods who have driven him to despair. As he tells Theseus, "as self-willed as the god is, so am I against the gods" (αὐθαδὲς ὁ θεός, πρὸς δὲ τοὺς θεοὺς ἐγώ, 1243). His statement sounds like a reversal of religious reciprocity. Mortals would honor gods with sacrifices and prayers so that the gods would be generous to them in return. Heracles has been left to suffer by Zeus; he has been attacked by Hera. Now, in return, he threatens to neglect the gods' honors, and attacks in the only way he can, in words.²²³

²²¹ As in Shelton (1979, 109), Foley (1985, 163-64). Similarly, Yunis proposes that Heracles means to say that Zeus and the Olympians do behave this way, but should not be considered gods; that a true god needs nothing (1988, 158-63).

²²² Lawrence argues that Euripides expects the audience to 're-write' the divine involvement in *HF* as metaphorical (1998, 138-39); Ruck pushes the duality of Heracles to an extreme, arguing that after his madness the hero becomes another version of himself, the son of Amphitryon rather than Zeus (1976, 55).

²²³ Compare Heracles' declared disapproval of the gods and disbelief in their actions to the speech Lycus makes attacking the virtue of Heracles. He questions Zeus' paternity, minimizes the labors, and claims that he is not truly courageous because he relies on the bow (140-69). The taunts are thematically similar; Lycus does not necessarily need to believe or disbelieve any of what he says for him to use it against his enemies; and the natural acceptance of Lycus' speech as a true attack against Heracles and Amphitryon should encourage an understanding of Heracles' words as similarly effective.

Heracles' speech against the gods must also be considered in the context of his reaction to his own deeds, upon discovering that he murdered his children and wife. His rejection of divinity as such grows out of his rejection of his own misfortune, expressed through his plans for suicide immediately after he regains his wits:

οὐκ εἶμι πέτρας λισσάδος πρὸς ἄλματα
 ἢ φάσγανον πρὸς ἦμαρ ἐξακοντίσας
 τέκνοις δικαστῆς αἵματος γενήσομαι,
 ἢ σάρκα †τὴν ἐμὴν† ἐμπρήσας πυρὶ
 δύσκλειαν ἢ μένει μ' ἀπόσομαι βίου; (1148-52)

“Shall I not go leap from a cliff ledge, or become avenger of my children’s blood by driving a sword in my liver, or by burning my flesh in fire, and shake off the ill-repute that remains for me in my life?”

As he wishes to brush away his own future reputation as kin-killer, he likewise tries to write off the familiar stories of divine misbehavior as “the wretched rumors of poets” (ἄοιδῶν οἶδε δύστηνοι λόγοι, 1346). Rejecting the actions of the gods entirely contradicts his own existence, his labors, and his madness. His words attempt complete erasure of his legend, as Michelini suggests (1987, 274-75) but while Euripides’ extra-dramatic intentions are unknowable, Heracles has a clearly stated dramatic motivation for this erasure. His denial forms an attempt at rhetorical suicide: as he cannot throw himself off a cliff or fall onto a sword, he tries to escape his suffering by claiming that it – and he – does not exist.

Both attempts at ending his disgrace ultimately fail because of the copious evidence to prove it true. Contemplating suicide, Heracles suggests ways to escape the reputation of a slaughter that still literally surrounds him. The corpses at his feet cannot be shaken off. In the second, Heracles tries to deny facts that are proven true by his very existence and the madness he has just experienced: that the gods take part in forbidden love affairs and that they struggle for power over one another. In his initial response to Theseus Heracles himself has just clearly

acknowledged these very things, that Zeus fathered him and Hera attacked him in jealousy against her husband. And as the corpses lie at his feet as a visible reminder of the reality he cannot shake off about his own deeds, the two altars of Zeus also stand to affirm the reality of the god's role in his misfortune.

After his final attempt to reject his reality by rejecting the reality of the gods, Heracles abruptly shifts to acceptance. He determines not to kill himself, but as Theseus commanded him, to carry on and go to Athens (1347ff.). He carries his weapons with him as reminders of both his labors and his murders (1377-85); he asks Theseus to help him deliver Cerberus and complete his final labor (1386-88); and he instructs Amphitryon to bury his children (1422). All of these affirm his acceptance of the reality of everything he has undergone. The quick reversal of his former position can be seen as an implicit acknowledgement of the reality of the divine order, his own situation, and ultimately his own fate as a future Olympian. But he conspicuously does not retract any of his harsh words against the gods. It suits the tragedy that there is no hint at reconciliation between Heracles and any of the gods following his criticisms; for if *HF* makes one thing clear, it is that the divine world is full of hostilities and disagreements. The future divine Heracles will take his place on Olympus with his own grudges and dark history to match those of Zeus and Hera, Iris and Lyssa, and the other gods.

Conclusion

Where previous chapters have discussed mortals who successfully use ritual to their advantage, *HF* shows a far bleaker outcome of engagement with the gods. Heracles enters the play near divinity, successful in everything from battling the giants to returning from Hades. But although he first succeeds in rescuing his family from Lycus' threat of murder, he soon

succumbs to the madness of Lyssa and kills the very ones he just protected. Though his family supplicates Zeus at his public altar and Heracles begins purifications at his private one, the hero's divine father shows no indication of helping his descendants and his altars stand as visual representations of the futility of ritual attempts to request his favor. Heracles' rescue and his ritual actions are twisted and reversed as he slaughters his family in a perverted sacrifice around Zeus' altar. The bickering of Iris and Lyssa, and the implied fighting between Hera and Zeus, as well as Heracles' bitter criticisms of the gods, sketch a view of the complexity of relationships among the gods as well as between gods and mortals. Heracles' harsh words against Hera and the rest of the gods, and his outright rejection of their nature, function as ritual attacks against the divinities he sees as his enemies. As mortal speech has some power in prayer to the gods, the hero finds religious power in his criticisms as well. Finally, the audience knows the context of his future apotheosis as well as his existing relationship with the gods as a battle companion and a son of Zeus. This framework of past and future divine associations complicates our understanding of Heracles' words. Is Heracles speaking sincerely against the nature of the gods he has fought alongside and will one day join forever? In his lowest moment, he speaks as much against his own actions as against the behavior of his future peers.

Chapter 5: The Intermediacy and Ritual Participation of Dionysus

Previous chapters have addressed tragedies in which Euripides portrays mortals who, due to their interactions with gods, attain an intermediate position between mortality and divinity. They develop close relationships with gods, exercise authority over ritual actions, receive honors and titles associated with gods, and even criticize, fight against, and act to affect divinities. Gods appear and play important roles in these tragedies, but the focus is on the mortals and how they interact with ritual and religious status. In *Bacchae*, however, Dionysus is the constant focus. He dominates the stage from prologue to epilogue, directing the action towards his ultimate goal, ritual recognition of his divinity. The play is bursting with the actions, costume, and language of hymns and Dionysian cult; the god employs it all masterfully to achieve his final epiphany to Thebes. But although Dionysus is recognizable to the audience as a god, he takes a mortal disguise until his final appearance in the epilogue; he walks onstage and interacts with mortals as the Lydian stranger throughout. He is also portrayed as a participant in the god's rites, and in the first half of the play great emphasis is placed on his birth from a mortal mother. Semele is treated much as the intermediate mortals of previous chapters, honored posthumously with a cult sanctuary and spoken of as more than mortal. Her intermediacy in death draws further attention to Dionysus' own liminal status, both as a mortal-born god and a god in mortal disguise. Both of their intermediacies develop the sense of flexibility in the Euripidean religious system. They illustrate the changes brought about by encounters with the divine, and both the closeness and the distance between gods and mortals. Dionysus' intermediacy in *Bacchae* depicts in a very literal, physical way the power of religious activity to alter status and to encounter the gods.

The emphasis on Dionysus' mortal origins and the quasi-divine treatment of his mother Semele illustrate the dynamism of status in the religious system of Euripides. Encounters with

Zeus' divine nature bring about drastic, lasting changes in both of them: Semele is reduced to smoldering embers; her son, born from Zeus' thigh as a god. Euripides places the question of Dionysus' acceptance as a god in the context of his complicated status. In doing so he also introduces the theme of the god's own power to transform others through their encounters with him. As Dionysus and Semele are changed by their contact with Zeus, so Pentheus and Agave and the other Thebans are transformed by their interactions with Dionysus. The god's presence onstage as a participant and leader of his own rituals shows in an especially literal way the significance of religious ritual as an encounter with the gods. The Theban women and the chorus of maenads celebrate their revels in the literal presence of their god, and Pentheus' direct conversation and debate with Dionysus results in his unwitting incorporation into the cult. The stories of the characters in *Bacchae* vividly depict the ability of religious ritual to change those who participate.

The constant presence of ritual in *Bacchae* illustrates its power in Euripidean tragedy to alter and transform. In the hands of a god, this ritual power is greatly increased. Dionysus uses his rites to control the actions of Theban mortals and to win his vindication. Agave and the Theban women are compelled to go up the mountain as maenads, and there they perform wonders as proof of the god. Pentheus resists any acknowledgement of Dionysus but is tricked by him into performing actions associated with his cult initiations and dressing as one of his followers. In doing so his mind is altered and he is ultimately transformed into a sacrificial beast to be torn apart by the maenads' hands. Dionysus succeeds in revealing his divinity to Thebes, and he does so through the power of his ritual. Given Dionysus' mortal origins and intermediacy within the play, and his single-minded focus on attaining recognition and honors as a god, it seems that ritual also has a significant effect on Dionysus himself. As his rites take hold and are

performed by Thebans, first the women and later Pentheus, he increasingly reveals himself in divine form. Not until the epilogue, when the rituals have reached their disastrous conclusion, does he appear *ex machina* in a true epiphany. Dionysus is already a god, but his divinity is doubted and his honors denied until he compels Thebes into participation in his rites. Through his rituals he reaffirms his divinity and strengthens his own status as a god.

Does Dionysus disguise himself as a mortal because his divinity is in doubt, or is his divinity in doubt because he is disguised as a mortal? This chicken-and-egg problem is not clearly resolved by any reading of the text, but it does reaffirm the interconnectedness of action and status in his religious context. He dresses, and is treated, as a mortal; then he is recognized, and appears, as a god. While there is no explicit causation, the two are evidently linked. Pentheus' use of disguise, and his seeming transformation into the maenad whose costume he wears, further emphasize the power of disguise. The theme of transformative costume is particularly relevant given the dramatic context of *Bacchae* and Dionysus' own role as the god of theater.

Critical Considerations: Dionysian Tragedies and Dionysian Cult

The story of Pentheus told in *Bacchae* draws on a number of common patterns in Greek mythology. In the broadest sense, it is one of many stories about divine punishment.²²⁴ It portrays a god visiting mortals in disguise, and the establishment of cult rituals to commemorate a disaster brought about by divine wrath (Seaford 1996, 26). The story of Pentheus also belongs

²²⁴ Burnett describes this mythic pattern in detail, and discusses the significant departures from the norm in Euripides' version of Pentheus' death (1970, 15-18).

to a set of myths specifically about Dionysus establishing his cult in the face of resistance from mortals, frequently the local rulers. Lycourgos, the daughters of Minyas, and the daughters of Proitos, are other royal figures who, like Pentheus, reject the god's cult and suffer the consequences.²²⁵ These 'resistance myths,' particularly Pentheus and Lykourgos, appear frequently in the surviving titles and fragments of early Athenian tragedy. Enough evidence of these remains to establish that much of Euripides' version is an already-established part of the story: Dionysus is captured and questioned, the palace shakes, and of course Pentheus pursues the Theban maenads and is torn apart by them.²²⁶ There is evidence also of significant variations in the story: vase paintings depict an armed and undisguised Pentheus being attacked by the maenads, and do not identify his mother Agave as his killer (Dodds 1960, xxxiii-vi). That Euripides chooses to portray the costumed Pentheus and emphasize the mother-son relationship in his death suggests that these elements are important to his narrative program in *Bacchae*, whether or not they are his inventions.

The mother-son pair of Agave and Pentheus parallels the relationship of Agave's sister Semele and her son Dionysus, a relationship that Euripides emphasizes repeatedly. And the costuming of Pentheus allows Dionysus to achieve his revenge by compelling his enemy's participation in his rites and demonstrating their transformative power. Pentheus' disguise and his relationship with Agave combine for a compelling recognition scene at the conclusion, when Agave realizes she is holding her son's head after failing to recognize him before his death.

²²⁵ For a full overview of these Dionysian 'resistance myths' see McGinty 1978, 77-78.

²²⁶ Seaford 1996, 26-27. See 26 n.9 for a list of surviving titles linked to these myths. Seaford also details a series of parallels in details of the text, such as references to bulls and maenads being compared to birds.

These scenes demonstrate the great power of Dionysus and his costumes. A mother is expected to recognize her child even when others do not; her inability to see him as her son proves the absolute transformation Dionysus has effected in both of them.²²⁷

Dionysus is known both to ancient and modern readers as a god who bends, breaks, and transgresses the boundaries that segment our understanding of the world. He is born from a mortal mother but made divine, Greek but foreign, male but effeminate, a god but bull-horned and bestial, torn apart and cooked but brought back to life. *Bacchae* reflects the transgressive nature of the god, playing with contradictory ideas and identities. Many scholars have developed structuralist readings of the play emphasizing Dionysus as the destroyer of boundaries. Segal in particular writes extensively on Dionysus as a force that reverses opposites, destroys distinctions, and confuses the boundaries of normal existence.²²⁸ More recently Buxton takes up the theme and argues that while Dionysus does collapse many boundaries, *Bacchae* also reaffirms and maintains essential distinctions despite the pressure on them to collapse (2009, 234, 245-47). To generalize, such readings tend to focus especially on categories like sex roles and political or civic organization. For the purposes of this project, though, the boundary between mortal and divine is especially relevant. Dionysus' own origin and nature challenge this boundary, and throughout *Bacchae* he continues to transgress it through his presence onstage, his participation in his maenads' revels, and his power to use ritual to transform.

²²⁷ McClure writes about the particular expectation of maternal recognition and its significance in tragic scenes (2015).

²²⁸ Segal 1978, 1982, and 1985 all take up this theme.

As *Bacchae* is backed with references to Dionysian worship and focuses on the mandate to perform his rites, scholars have long seen it as a valuable source for understanding Dionysian cult. Because of the secrecy inherent to mystery cults, much less is known about their specifics than with other Greek practices. There is, for example, substantial discussion about whether and to what extent the maenadic revels depicted in *Bacchae* reflect historical practice. The question of the *sparagmos* and *omophagia* (the tearing up of animals with bare hands and the consumption of their raw flesh) as contemporary practice, relics of practices in an earlier age, or pure myth, draws debate especially.²²⁹ Seaford reads the tragedy, most notably the scenes between Dionysus and Pentheus, as a pseudo-initiation into the god's cult. *Bacchae* does not contain the specific secrets of the mysteries, as revealing these would be extremely sacrilegious; but Seaford argues that the language and imagery of the scenes draw heavily from the themes and experiences of mystery cults such as riddling language, emerging from darkness to light, and being moved from fear and confusion to joy and understanding (1981, 252-53). Foley draws attention to the play's parallels with a more public form of worship, detailing the similarities between its narrative structure and the sequence of events at civic festivals like the Dionysia (1985, 208-10). Whether or not the specifics of religious practice in *Bacchae* closely reflect contemporary ritual, the practices it depicts are easily recognizable as rites associated with Dionysus. Euripides does not reliably communicate the historical details of Dionysian worship. What he does clearly express, however, is the tremendous power of the rites of Dionysus, and their deep importance to the god they honor.

²²⁹ Dodds takes it as contemporary practice, speculating that an older form may have involved cannibalism (1960, xvi-ix). Seaford calls it "questionable" (1996, 36-37). Henrichs speculates that it is a prehistoric practice surviving only in art (1978, 147-52) and Obbink takes it as fundamentally mythical (1993, 69).

Dionysus Between Worlds

Dionysus, like Heracles, is an unusual Olympian due to his origin as a son of Zeus born to a mortal woman. He is only made a god because he is sewn in Zeus' thigh to finish gestating after his mother Semele is killed. Euripides emphasizes the particular intermediacy of Dionysus as a mortal-born god. He repeatedly calls attention to Semele and her death, and he perhaps even displays her tomb onstage as a visual reminder of it. He has the god appear at stage level among mortals for almost the entire duration of the tragedy, and in mortal disguise unrecognized by anyone but the audience. Dionysus poses not just as a mortal, but as one of his own followers and a leader of his maenads. With this costume Euripides puts the god in the paradoxical position of participating in the worship of himself.

From the first moments of *Bacchae* Euripides portrays Dionysus as a figure who moves between mortal and divine identities. The god enters at stage level, in contrast with the majority of divine appearances.²³⁰ He likely bears some visual indications both of his divinity, especially in the traditional smiling mask of a god in tragedy; and also of his being disguised as a mortal, especially in the trappings of his worshippers. As there is no evidence of Classical tragic actors ever changing masks and Dionysus is meant to be recognizably divine to the audience for the whole of the play, it is reasonable to conclude as Foley does that his mask is the smiling mask of a tragic god rather than the frowning mortal one.²³¹ As for the costume, in his prologue Dionysus

²³⁰ Mastronarde discusses several other stage-level appearances of prologue gods, some of which are explained by a more satyric or comic identity of the god in question (as in *Alcestis* and *Ion*), others by a significant divine presence throughout the course of the play (as in *Eumenides* and the *Prometheus* cycle). Dionysus' stage-level appearance in *Bacchae* he attributes to the god's mortal disguise (1990, 273-75).

²³¹ For the mask of Dionysus see Foley 1980, 127-29 and Chaston 2009, 188-89.

repeatedly refers to his mortal disguise. It is dramatically expedient that these references would be accompanied by gestures at the mortal aspects of his costume. The contrasting mask and costume serve as a visual reminder of the dual nature of Dionysus, of mortal origin and divine status; of his current deception among the Thebans; of the god's association with disguise and costume; and of the Dionysian dramatic context in which the god is being represented. Dionysus' disguise also points to the close association between the god and his mortal followers. The textual clues about his appearance (the locks of hair, the effeminate appearance, the *thyrsus*) can apply both to representations of Dionysus in his divine form and to his human worshippers.²³² But in the context of the play his appearance is primarily linked to the appearance of the various mortal characters as they take up Dionysian worship, and to Dionysus' pretended role as one of his own followers.

In the prologue's opening lines Dionysus places his own introduction by name in between the names and roles of his two parents: he calls himself first "the son of Zeus" (Διὸς παῖς, 1); then by his own divine name, Dionysus (2), then as the one "delivered by Semele" (Σεμέλη λοχευθεῖς, 3).²³³ He not only aligns himself with both his divine and his mortal ancestry, but he places himself between the two. His ambiguity between divine and mortal is therefore immediately established. He then explains that he has "changed appearance from a god's to mortal form" (μορφὴν δ' ἀμείψας ἐκ θεοῦ βροτησίαν, 4), a fact that he repeats toward the end of the prologue (53-54).²³⁴ Unusually for tragedy, Dionysus will remain on the stage and

²³² See for example Pentheus' description of his hair, effeminate appearance, and *thyrsus* in 233-41 and 453-59.

²³³ Greek text is from Seaford 1996 unless otherwise specified. Translations are my own.

²³⁴ Because 53-54 repeat information already stated in 4, some commentators suggest that they are interpolated (Willink 1966, 30-31). But Dodds sees the lines as emphasizing and clarifying the god's mortal disguise, especially

participate in the action as a protagonist; the emphasis on his disguise helps to prepare the audience for this (Seaford 1996, 147-49). His costuming also reflects the prominence of Dionysus as god of theater, and certainly nods to the festival of Dionysus at which it is performed.²³⁵ The emphasis on the power of costume continues in Dionysus' encounters with Pentheus, combining the theatrical and ritual power of the god. But the god's disguise also continues his characterization as one positioned in between the worlds of gods and mortals. Though gods taking mortal appearance is a common trope in Greek myth, it is not typical of extant tragedy.²³⁶ Apollo serves Admetus in disguise before *Alcestis* begins; but this is as a punishment, not voluntarily on the god's part. Moreover, when he appears in the prologue his disguise has already been revealed and he is dressed once again as a god.²³⁷ More typically in tragedy the gods act unseen, until they intervene directly *ex machina* with the full appearance of a god. Or if they take a greater role in the drama, as in *Eumenides* or *Prometheus Bound*, their divinity is clearly established to all involved.

The change in Dionysus' appearance is only the first indication of how he is exceptionally close for a god to the world of mortals. His ambiguity is especially apparent in his

in relation to the chorus he is about to address and the maenads he is departing to join. He importantly reminds the audience that he will be recognized not as their god, but as their co-worshipper (1960, 69-70).

²³⁵ Segal 1982, 215-237, is a good starting point for thinking about Dionysus' and Pentheus' masks and costumes as a reflection on tragedy and its relationship to Dionysus.

²³⁶ Mastronarde classifies only *Bacchae* as containing a disguised god onstage, of those plays about which we have sufficient information to say anything (1990, 281-89). Burnett gives an extensive list of disguised gods in Greek literature of other genres (1970, 24 n.8). Tragedies on the triumphs of Dionysus would be a likely place to find parallels, but not enough survives to say much. Fragments of Aeschylus' *Lycurgetia* and Theban tetralogy suggest that Dionysus' identity is not recognized, suggesting he may have appeared in disguise as in *Bacchae*; and that Hera enters in disguise to start rumors against Semele and her son (Dodds 1960, xxix-xxxii). This could suggest that Dionysus and his myths in particular are suitable for portraying disguised gods onstage.

²³⁷ Thanatos' reference to his bow makes this clear (*Alc.* 39-40)

relationship with religious ritual. Like any god, Dionysus values the honors he receives from mortals in his rituals. The outrage at being denied his rites and his plan of retaliation in the prologue are comparable to those of Aphrodite in *Hippolytus* (Dodds 1960, 62). But much as he implicates himself in the action of the play more than other gods in tragedies, Dionysus also seems to be unusually involved in the rituals practiced in his honor. The mortal disguise he refers to in his opening lines may also be an indication of this ritual involvement. Like the male initiands in his mystery cult, who are believed to have dressed as women, Dionysus uses costume to change his appearance to that of a mortal, the opposite of his own divine identity. His change in appearance anticipates the initiation he will force on Pentheus, in which the king will dress as a maenad.

Damen and Richards demonstrate that Euripides has Dionysus repeatedly perform religious hymns in his own honor (2012, 346-51; 356-57). His prologue speech follows the essential form of a hymn, and again at 576-84 he leads the chorus in another quasi-hymn to himself. In the prologue especially, Damen and Richards identify all the main elements of a hymn in their proper order: the invocation naming the god and his attributes; praise for his power and functions, often in narrative form; and prayer, requesting help and often an appearance by the god (2012, 344). While the *parodos* of *Bacchae* is widely recognized as following this structure as well as typical hymnic style, for the god to invoke himself is extremely paradoxical. As Hamilton notes, gods are not expected to pray to anyone, much less to themselves (1985, 65). But as Dionysus assumes his disguise as a mortal worshipper, his hymnic prologue anticipates the extent to which he participates in his own worship throughout the tragedy. The god's appearance as a mortal reflects both his history as a mortal son of Zeus and his current lack of recognition as divine. It also illustrates the capacity of ritual to facilitate participation in the

divine and to elevate status. The fluidity of identity and closeness to the god characteristic of Dionysian cult are given perfect form in the image of the god himself among the worshippers, himself acting as a worshipper.

The chorus of Asian Maenads refer frequently to Dionysus as an active participant in his own Bacchic rituals. He “leads the *thiasos*” (ἄγη θιάσους, 115) as “Bromios the commander” (ὁ δ’ ἔξαρχος Βρόμιος, 141). He moves among them, participating in familiar aspects of Dionysian practice, including the *thyrsus*, wild cries, and frenzied dance: “holding up the gleaming pine flame, he rushes with the fennel with running and dances, stirring up the wanderers and shaking them with cries” (ὁ Βακχεὺς ἀνέχων / πυρσώδη φλόγα πεύκας / ἐκ νάρθηκος αἰσσει / δρόμῳ καὶ χοροῖσιν / πλανάτας ἐρεθίζων / ἰαχαῖς τ’ ἀναπάλλων, 145-49).²³⁸ The god is the leader of the group, but in appearance and action he is largely the same as they are. The imagery of him leading the dances, sung by the chorus of maenads, also suggests Dionysus as their *choregos*. As he is a participant in his own cult, he is likewise a participant in his festival’s tragedies both as the god in mortal disguise and as the choral leader. The lines preceding 145-49, though highly contested, may illustrate the extent of Dionysus’ participation even more vividly. The chorus describes somebody falling to the ground, wearing the fawnskin, hunting, and eating the raw flesh of his catch, all clear aspects of the Dionysian worshipper (135-39). As it survives, the passage most easily refers to Dionysus himself, who is then made even more completely the image of a maenad. There are, however, textual and metrical issues that suggest possible

²³⁸ They echo this imagery again in the second stasimon, when they wonder where Dionysus is and imagine him leading his worshippers in other places (550-75).

corruption and frustrate attempts at a clear reading of the passage.²³⁹ But even if 135-39 is meant to depict a more generalized worshipper, the focus turns to the god's own participation in 141: "the leader is Bromios" (ὁ δ' ἑξαρχος Βρόμιος). Whoever it is that falls to the ground and eats the flesh, Dionysus is envisioned as present and involved.

Dionysus' presence and participation in his *thiasoi* is additionally complicated by the issue of gender among his worshippers. He is a male god among female maenads, both in the chorus and in the Theban *thiasos* on the mountain. There has been some disagreement about male presence and participation in Dionysian worship.²⁴⁰ But as a god known for both his effeminacy and his boundary-crossing, Dionysus effortlessly moves among the maenads who, by their gender and their mortality, are doubly distinct from him. Pentheus' comments on the god's effeminate appearance emphasize his transgression of this boundary.

The chorus describes this participation by Dionysus in his rituals without knowing that the god is in fact leading their own *thiasos* in disguise as the Lydian stranger. Upon his arrival at Thebes he not only causes the women of the city to take up Bacchic revels, but he joins them himself: "I will go to the glens of Cithaeron where they are, and take part in the dances with the bacchantes" (ἐγὼ δὲ βάκχαις, ἐς Κιθαιρῶνος πτυχὰς / ἐλθὼν ἴν' εἰσί, συμμετασχίσω χορῶν, 62-63). The verb especially emphasizes his participation together with the others, with the emphatic

²³⁹ For more detailed discussion of the problems see Dodds 1960, 85-87; Willink 1966, 31-35; and Seaford 1996, 164-65.

²⁴⁰ Scullion argues for male presence and perhaps participation in maenadic ritual, contrary to general belief (2013). For opposing views see for example Zeitlin 1985 and Wohl 2005.

doubled prepositional prefixes.²⁴¹ συμμετέχω is used elsewhere especially in reference to military comradery, a context in which participation together as equals is particularly valued.²⁴² Dionysian cult is known for the distinctive closeness of its worshippers to their god. The metaphorical presence of Dionysus among his bacchants is thought to be manifest in the person of the *thiasos*' leader and in the worshippers' altered mental state.²⁴³ Euripides accentuates this aspect of Dionysian cult by having the god literally dance among his followers in disguise. This play between his physical participation and his divine epiphany continues throughout *Bacchae*, as every unwitting interaction with the Lydian becomes a ritual engagement with the god.

Disguised as a mortal leader of his own maenads, Dionysus serves as a mediator between mortals and his own divine form.²⁴⁴ He, as a mortal representative, puts forward the god's claims to divinity (242-45), promotes the Dionysian rites (465, 481-84, 794-95), and promises the god's punishment on Pentheus (490, 515-18, 787-91). He presents himself to Pentheus as a mediator between Dionysus and mortals, claiming that the god himself initiated him personally:

“Dionysus himself, the son of Zeus, brought me into (the rites)...he was facing me and I him, and he gave me the mysteries” (Διόνυσος αὐτός μ' εἰσέβησ', ὁ τοῦ Διός... ὀρῶν ὀρῶντα, καὶ δίδωσιν ὄργια, 466, 470). The intimate contact the Lydian emphasizes with the god heightens the

²⁴¹ Similarly Pentheus accuses the Lydian of “mingling” with the maenads (συγγίγνεται, 237). His intended implication is sexual (Seaford 1996, 172); but to the informed audience it again emphasizes the god's closeness to his bacchants and their rites.

²⁴² e.g. Plut. *Pyrrh.* 4, Eur. *Supp.* 648

²⁴³ Dodds 1960, 82-83; Hamilton 1985, 65; Seaford 1994, 282-88; Seaford 1996, 162

²⁴⁴ See Hamilton for a discussion of this “fusion of priest and god.” He reads Dionysus in *Bacchae* as the culmination of a trend in late Euripidean plays in which the priest or priestess identifies ever more closely with the god they represent (1985).

audience's discrepant awareness of his identity, as they already know that the two are one and the same. But it also emphasizes the direct contact with divinity that mystery religion promises: an initiate plausibly claims that the god himself (αὐτός) delivers the rites to him in person (ὁρῶν ὁρῶντα).²⁴⁵ And Pentheus will likewise experience his own initiation by Dionysus in person, though unwittingly. By appearing in disguise as his own representative, doubling himself as the Lydian on one hand and the god on the other, Dionysus becomes his own mediator and collapses the boundaries between divine object of worship and mortal worshipper.

Dionysus' association with wine offers another way in which Dionysus mediates, this time between mortals and other gods. Teiresias identifies him with the libations poured out in honor of the gods: "he himself, being a god, is poured out to the gods, so that it is through him that men have good things" (οὗτος θεοῖσι σπένδεται θεὸς γεγώς, / ὥστε διὰ τοῦτον τὰγάθ' ἀνθρώπους ἔχειν, 284-85). Dionysus himself (οὗτος) becomes physically implicated in not only his own rituals but the worship of all gods.²⁴⁶ Teiresias also gives specific examples of Dionysus' association with the ritual aspects of other gods: he is responsible for prophecies (299-301), can be seen at Delphi (306-07), and has a share in Ares (302-04). Thus, in a more general sense Teiresias depicts Dionysus as a participant and mediator in a wide variety of mortal encounters with the divine. The prophet partially misses the mark in his encomium of Dionysus; his suggestion that the story of his gestation in Zeus' thigh is a fabrication is in contradiction with

²⁴⁵ The medieval manuscripts have ἡμᾶς in place of αὐτός, but one of the papyri reads αὐτός μ', which Dodds finds plausible (1960, 136) and Seaford accepts as correct (1996, 187). This matches the focus of Pentheus' questioning and Dionysus' other answers, which remains on the Lydian alone and does not shift to the initiates until 473.

²⁴⁶ It is important to note, as Obbink stresses, that the pouring out of wine should not be understood in a sacrificial sense, as in the Christian interpretation of wine as sacrificial blood (1993, 66-70) The god is emphatically not being sacrificed when libations are made; nevertheless, Euripides plays on the close identification of Dionysus with wine to suggest an unusual mediative role for the god.

the god's own account (286-97). His entire characterization of the god, then, might be called into question. Mastronarde and Lefkowitz both see the prophet as one who misunderstands the essential nature of the god and his destructive vengeance (1986, 206-07; 1989, 74-75). On the other hand, even in his rationalized birth narrative, Teiresias captures an essential element of Dionysus: the disguise and deception with which Zeus hides him from Hera's jealousy. Additionally, Dionysus's association with wine is an attested theme of his Mysteries, and Seaford speculates that the alternate birth narrative may have similar mystic roots (1996, 106-107).²⁴⁷ So although Teiresias' recognition of Dionysus does not match in tone or detail with the god's self-presentation, the essence of his speech is not out of place.

Dionysus' prolonged onstage interactions with the mortal world are, in extant tragedy, unparalleled. The gods in *Alcestis*, *IT*, and *Heracles* have significant influence on the circumstances and outcomes of the tragedies, but their direct interactions onstage are minimal. In each tragedy there is a past history of significant interactions between gods and mortals. Apollo serves in Admetus' house and offers him escape from death; Artemis rescues Iphigenia from being sacrificed and establishes her as priestess in Tauris; Apollo commands Orestes to avenge his father and brings him to Athena's court to rid himself of the Furies; and Heracles fights alongside gods in the Gigantomachy. But these are all in the past, and during the tragedies themselves their appearances are few. Apollo speaks the prologue to *Alcestis* and interacts with Thanatos; Athena appears *ex machina* at the end of *IT*; Iris and Lyssa likewise appear *ex machina* in *Heracles* but in the middle of the play. In each of these tragedies the actions depicted onstage are taken primarily by mortals, and mortal religious activity is at the forefront. In

²⁴⁷ For more on Dionysus as wine see Obbink 1993; and Burkert 1983, 224-25

contrast, Dionysus dominates the stage and controls the action through his own religious rites. Euripides highlights the mortal origins of the god and his link to the Theban royal family, bringing him closer to the world in which he is disguised. Inherently a god of intermediacy and boundary-breaking, Dionysus easily fits the role of a mortal turned god and then disguised as a mortal. More unusual still, though, is the extent to which Dionysus instigates and participates in his own rituals and prayers. This paradoxical portrayal reflects the closeness to divinity that mystery cults like the Dionysian cult promise. Within *Bacchae* it also demonstrates the extent to which Dionysus is invested in receiving ritual honors from all people, and especially from Pentheus and Thebes. Mortal observance of the rituals of Dionysus is closely linked to his divine status and to his goal of fully revealing himself as a god to Thebes.

Semele Ablaze

Dionysus is an unusual god, the divine son of a mortal woman. Though Semele is dead and does not appear in *Bacchae*, she is frequently named as his mother and the circumstances of her son's conception and birth are retold several times. Furthermore, the sanctuary of her tomb has a significant presence in the text and the physical space of the play. It is linked with Dionysus' first arrival in Thebes, and with his initial encounter with Pentheus where he first demonstrates his divine power. It is likely that the tomb is even represented visibly in the orchestra, and so remains onstage as a visual reminder of Dionysus' mortal origins for the duration of the play. Semele's association with Zeus, the prominence of her sanctuary, and the divinity of her mortal-born son, all point to the power of encounter with the gods to transform. Although killed by Zeus appearing to her in his full divinity, she maintains a presence as hero or minor divinity in her sanctuary. She receives ritual honors both from her father Cadmus and from

her now-divine son Dionysus. Her quasi-divine role in death mirrors the transformation of Dionysus through a second birth by Zeus, and highlights his nature as one who transgresses fixed boundaries. The emphasis on the maternal bond between Semele and Dionysus also pairs thematically with the bond between her sister Agave and Agave's son Pentheus. The parallel mother-son relationships bring together Dionysus and Pentheus as doubles of each other, as becomes clear through their interactions over the course of the play. Semele's encounter with Zeus, which kills her and divinizes her son, is ultimately mirrored by Pentheus' and Agave's encounters with Dionysus, disastrous to them both.

After introducing himself in the prologue, Dionysus begins by describing the tomb of his mother Semele near where he is. It is the only element of his surroundings he mentions at any length. Set between his announcement of arrival and the declaration of his purpose in coming, the passage emphasizes the importance to Dionysus of his mother and her honors in death:

ὄρω δὲ μητρὸς μνημα τῆς κεραυνίας
 τόδ' ἐγγύς οἴκων καὶ δόμων ἐρείπια
 τυφόμενα Δίου πυρὸς ἔτι ζῶσαν φλόγα,
 ἀθάνατον Ἥρας μητέρ' εἰς ἐμὴν ὕβριν.
 αἰνῶ δὲ Κάδμον, ἄβατον ὃς πέδον τόδε
 τίθησι, θυγατρὸς σηκόν· ἀμπέλου δέ νιν
 πέριξ ἐγὼ κάλυψα βοτρυῶδει χλόη.

(6-12)

I see the monument of my mother, killed by the thunderbolt, close to the house, and the ruins of the palace smoldering with the still-living flame of Zeus' fire, the deathless outrage of Hera against my mother. I commend Cadmus, who made this ground untrodden, the precinct of his daughter. And I covered it around with the grape-growing greenery of the vine.

It is unclear from the text whether the tomb would be visible as part of the set, or if it is, where and how detailed it would have been. Chaston suggests that it is located at the hearth or altar in

the orchestra.²⁴⁸ Wiles similarly proposes a small altar and vine-covered pillar as a simple representation of the sanctuary (1997, 172-74). Whether onstage or off, it is generally agreed that there would be some visible smoke from the sanctuary's eternal flame, especially during the later 'palace miracle' when smoke and flame accompany earthquakes and the voice of Dionysus (Castellani 1976, 65 n.8). But even in the absence of an explicitly represented sanctuary, the focused verbal description of the area supplies a visual in the audience's mind. The length and detail of the tomb's description, and its singular focus (no other elements of the palace area are described) suggest its thematic importance to the ensuing tragedy.²⁴⁹ Dionysus emphasizes her story and her continued status in Thebes, links himself spatially to his mortal ancestry, and emphasizes the familial relationship between Pentheus' house and the god the king refuses to acknowledge.

Dionysus speaks approvingly of Cadmus' decision to cultivate Semele's tomb as a sacred precinct. His words walk the line between typical honors for the deceased and the honors reserved for heroes and even gods. Her tomb is a monument (μνημα, 6); a holy ground not to be walked on (ἄβατον πέδον, 10); a sacred enclosure (σηκόν, 11).²⁵⁰ Each of these terms can be used both for the sacredness of mortal tombs as well as that of a god's precinct. But aside from

²⁴⁸ 2009, 193-94. As she acknowledges, there is no archaeological evidence that the Theater of Dionysus in Athens had an altar in the orchestra, but argues that it would be consistent with the ritual origins of tragedy. See also my discussion of the Altar of Zeus Soter in *HF* regarding the placement of an onstage altar or *thymele*.

²⁴⁹ Commentators have taken up several themes from the emphasis on the tomb: the futility of mortal architecture in the face of divine power (Scott 1975, 340-43); the centrality of Dionysus and his divinity through the presence of the vines on Semele's precinct (Chaston 2009, 197-98); Dionysus' dominance and involvement in the revels of his maenad chorus through a speculative image of the god hung on the pillar representing the precinct (Wiles 1997, 172-74).

²⁵⁰ μνημα is repeated by Agave, who wishes to see no reminder (μνημα) of the rites she has endured. On the parallel see Kalke 1985, 420 and Segal 1999-2000, 287

Dionysus' repetitive emphasis that the place is holy, the flame of Zeus himself associates it with divinity. Greek tradition holds that land struck by lightning is sacred ground by its association with Zeus, and there is historical evidence that Thebes maintained Semele's tomb as such (Dodds 1960, 62-63; Fisher 1992, 185). But although the place is marked out by Zeus' fire, Dionysus makes it clear that it belongs to Semele and her family as much as Zeus and his lightning. He names Zeus in association with the smoke and the still-smoldering flame (6, 8) but the place is dedicated to Dionysus' mother (6, 9), located by the family home (7), honored by her father Cadmus (10) for his daughter (11), and tended also by her son Dionysus (11-12). She is made sacred by her deadly association with Zeus and his lightning, and her tomb is cultivated as for a hero or minor goddess. In drawing attention to her precinct, Dionysus emphasizes the way in which Semele's encounter with a god, though deadly, transforms her and transmits to her some elements of divinity.²⁵¹

Dionysus concludes his description of Semele's grave with his own contribution to its holiness, the grape-vines enclosing it (11-12). In doing so, he adds one of his own divine aspects to the flame of Zeus as further confirmation of the precinct's sacredness. Like the flame, the vines represent both the divinity of the god who originates them and the honors due to Semele through her association with him. But Dionysus links his provision of vines to the work of the mortal Cadmus, who has established the sanctuary. Cadmus makes it a precinct; and Dionysus covers it with vines. In a sense the god identifies himself as a participant in the cult of his mother

²⁵¹ Of course Semele has her own divine lineage, as the daughter of Harmonia, divine personification of Peace. And Hesiod outright names Semele as a mortal become goddess in *Theogony* 940-42. There is also a theory that Semele originated from a chthonic pre-Greek goddess (Segal 1978, 191). However, Euripides has Dionysus focus closely on her association with Zeus and himself.

Semele. Later in the play Euripides shows Dionysus to be an active member of his own rites and implicates him in the worship of other gods. But here in the opening lines, the god first tends to the sanctuary of his mother. His gift of vines elevates her status, bringing her into closer association with divinity. If the tomb of Semele is visible onstage, it also provides a visual reminder of the god's connection to his mortal mother, and his diligence in honoring her cult as any mortal son might. In honoring Semele, Dionysus also furthers his own honors; her tomb, the flame, and his vine, all serve as reminders of his origin, his divinity, and (if onstage) his dominance over the entire drama.²⁵²

When Dionysus explains why he has come to Thebes in the prologue, he associates his own epiphany to the city with a defense of his mother Semele: "it is necessary for the city to learn this... and for me to speak in defense of my mother Semele, appearing to mortals as the god whom she bore to Zeus" (δεῖ γὰρ πόλιν τήνδ' ἐκμαθεῖν... / Σεμέλης τε μητρὸς ἀπολογήσασθαί μ' ὕπερ / φανέντα θνητοῖς δαίμον' ὄν τίκτει Δί, 39-42). As the vines of the god covering Semele's sanctuary contribute to the sacredness of the site, his more explicit epiphany to Thebes will legitimize her as a consort of Zeus worthy of cult honors. Her tomb, still smoking with Zeus' flame, stands as the first proof of Dionysus' divinity. His self-revelations to Pentheus and Thebes throughout the tragedy, culminating in his appearance *ex machina*, confirm his divinity and likewise prove his mother's status. Their roles are interconnected, and his ritual treatment of her sanctuary affects them both.

²⁵² Wiles emphasizes this dominance with his suggestion that the chorus enters bearing an image of the god, which is then hung on or near the onstage representation of Semele's tomb (1997, 172-74)

Two elements of Semele's death link her sanctuary and her encounter with Zeus with Dionysus' first partial epiphany to Pentheus. First, the destruction of the palace (7) is mirrored when Dionysus and his followers escape their bonds in Pentheus' house in the so-called "palace miracle" (Castellani 1976, 81). Dionysus calls on Earthquake and the chorus relates damage to the building (Hamilton 1974, 145-47): "Soon the halls of Pentheus will shake apart in a heap...did you see these stone architraves running apart? (τάχα τὰ Πενθέως μέλαθρα διατινάξεται πεσήμασιν... εἶδετε λάινα κίοσιν ἔμβολα / τάδε διάδρομα; 587-92). Second, the flame of Zeus that lives on at her smoldering tomb (8) flares up after the earthquake: "Do you not behold the fire, do you not discern around the holy tomb of Semele, the flame that the thunder-hurling bolt of Zeus once left?" (πῦρ οὐ λεύσσεις, οὐδ' ἀνγάζῃ / <τόνδε> Σεμέλας ἱερὸν ἀμφὶ τάφον / ἄν ποτε κεραυνόβολος ἔλιπε φλόγα / Δίος βροντά; 596-99).²⁵³ Dionysus again reveals his presence with flame when he calls on his maenads to destroy Pentheus, and "a light of holy fire stood fast against heaven and earth" (πρὸς οὐρανὸν / καὶ γαῖαν ἐστήριξε φῶς σεμνοῦ πυρός, 1082-83). The tomb of Semele is a prediction, perhaps one visible onstage, of the divine power Dionysus will soon demonstrate. His epiphany proves to be as destructive to Pentheus as his father Zeus' appearance was to Semele.²⁵⁴ But unlike Pentheus, who is utterly eradicated by the god, Semele maintains a presence in her sanctuary, and her bloodline is continued and divinized by Dionysus' gestation in Zeus' thigh. The still-living flame in her sanctuary carries on

²⁵³ Hamilton first identifies the 'palace miracle' as the birth epiphany of Dionysus, drawing on the parallel thunderbolts and the flaring of Semele's tomb (1974, 145-47). Castellani notes the parallel destructions of homes in both episodes, and argues that they are representative of the destruction of the family (1976, 81). Damen and Richards read the scene as a hymnic birth narrative in performance (2012, 357-58). Verdenius, on the other hand, does not find the parallels between Semele's death and the 'palace miracle' compelling and argues against reading it as an epiphany or birth narrative (1980, 11-12).

²⁵⁴ Gregory discusses the dangers of epiphany as a theme in the family of Cadmus (1985, 26).

the epiphany of Zeus in the past, anticipates the epiphany of Dionysus in the future, and in the present it also reveals the near-divine heroic nature that Semele enjoys by association with both of them.

In the first half of *Bacchae* Semele receives frequent mention. The tragedy begins with Dionysus giving a description of Semele's tomb and his birth by her; versions of the birth narrative are retold multiple times, and Dionysus is referred to as the son of Semele.²⁵⁵ Then, after the chorus sees the flame at her tomb flare up during the earthquake, she is no longer mentioned.²⁵⁶ Hamilton argues that her part is done because Dionysus has accomplished his first epiphany, the birth narrative played out in the 'palace miracle' (1974, 147-48). But even without verbal reference, her tomb and its flame remain – either in the orchestra or just out of sight – as a continuing memorial of Semele's death and her role in the making of a new god.

The frequent mentions of Semele, her tomb, and the birth of Dionysus, as well as the possible onstage representation of the sanctuary, make the mortal origins and family ties of Dionysus inescapable to the audience. The tomb precinct is of particular importance to the god and his epiphany at Thebes. He draws attention to it immediately upon his arrival and cultivates it with a symbol of his divinity. When he first makes his divine presence known in the palace, its flame flares up. Thematically the tomb of Semele represents the transformation of Dionysus from mortal to god, but also the lesser transformation of Semele from mortal to cult-heroine and the mutual effect that these two transformations have on one another. Semele's status and her

²⁵⁵ Semele's name appears at 3, 28, 41, 105, 278, 335, 376, 468, 581, 597. She is also referred to but not named at 88ff., 181, and 243ff.

²⁵⁶ It is, of course, possible that Dionysus names her in the lost lines of his *ex machina* appearance. For example, Willink suggests that he announces her vindication along with his (1966, 46-49).

interaction with Zeus significantly affect the status of her son, and his divinity likewise affects her status by his cultivation of her sanctuary. Finally, with the still-present flame of Zeus that destroyed her, the tomb also reminds the audience of the severe dangers of encountering a god, a lesson that Pentheus and Thebes soon learn.

Ritual and Status: Acting and Becoming

Euripides establishes that Dionysus is a god who has been transformed and that his mother, too, is transformed in the process. Likewise, it is clear in *Bacchae* that the rites of Dionysus contain the power to transform. Repeatedly in the tragedy, those who encounter the god and engage in his cult's rituals are changed by them. Pentheus' experience demonstrates this most vividly: he dresses in the costume of a maenad and mimics their movements, and in doing so he becomes subject to Dionysus and is led willingly to his doom. The maenads, too, are transformed by their reveling and become signs of the god's divine power and tools in his scheme. And finally Dionysus shows, by his intense interest in winning the ritual recognition of Thebes and the linking of his epiphanies with participation in his rites, that he too is affected and transformed by mortals participating in his cult.

The central action of *Bacchae* depicts the transformation of Pentheus from θεόμαχος to unwitting maenad, as the king succumbs to the power of Dionysus. Zeitlin identifies Pentheus' use of costume as a mimesis of both Dionysian initiation and of theatrical costuming (1985, 64).²⁵⁷ Although Pentheus does not intend to be initiated, his encounter with Dionysus

²⁵⁷ Seaford notes further elements of Pentheus' experience as elements of initiation: he experiences the trepidation and confusion of initiands when he pursues Dionysus inside the palace, and emerges from its darkness to a flash of light; later, he assumes a new identity and sees strange visions that reveal the nature of the god (1981, 256-62).

perceptibly changes him. The features of Dionysian ritual, under the direction of the god, have a powerful effect.²⁵⁸ Pentheus assumes the movements and the physical trappings of a maenad: the *chiton*, the animal skin, the loose hair, the jumping about and lifting the *thyrsus* (831-359, 930-31, 941-42). He dresses and plays this part as a disguise to observe the bacchantes, but in doing so he is more substantially changed. His appearance visually represents the extent of his transformation: he is dressed as a double of the god, who is himself in disguise as a Dionysian worshipper, and whose hair and thyrsus Pentheus notes mockingly at their first meeting (455, 493-95).²⁵⁹ Once dressed as a maenad, Pentheus' demeanor is different; he seems to be subjected to the same divine possession as worshippers who do the same things with the intention of receiving the god. He has abandoned his hostility toward the Lydian and tells him "I am entirely dependent on you" (σοὶ γὰρ ἀνακείμεσθα δῆ, 934). The verb often means to be dedicated to a god as a votive offering (Seaford 1996, 224). Though he still does not recognize his companion as Dionysus, he unwittingly declares his devotion to him and ironically predicts his death. In wearing the costume of Dionysian initiates Pentheus engages in the beginnings of the god's ritual. Although he does not intend to participate in the rites, he invites the transformations that they entail.

The power of the Bacchic rites over Pentheus is so powerful that he becomes unrecognizable even to his mother. When Dionysus mounts him atop a pine tree and calls to his maenads to attack him, Agave reaches him first and his attempts to beg her to stop are in vain:

²⁵⁸ Foley notes that dressing in costume is a theatrical element, and therefore a de facto act of Dionysian worship (1980, 114).

²⁵⁹ On the doubling of Pentheus and Dionysus see Foley 1980, 129-30; Seaford 1994, 282-88; Wohl 2005, 144. Kalke argues that Pentheus' change of dress begins his complete transformation into a *thyrsus*, a symbol of Dionysus (1985, 413-16).

πρώτη δὲ μήτηρ ἤρξεν ἱερέα φόνου
 καὶ προσπίτνει νιν· ὁ δὲ μίτραν κόμης ἄπο
 ἔρριπεν, ὡς νιν γνωρίσσασα μὴ κτάνοι
 τλήμων Ἀγαύη, καὶ λέγει παρηίδος
 ψαύων· Ἐγώ τοι, μήτηρ, εἰμί, παῖς σέθεν
 Πενθεύς, ὃν ἔτεκες ἐν δόμοις Ἐχίονος·
 οἴκτιρε δ' ὦ μήτέρ με, μηδὲ ταῖς ἐμαῖς
 ἀμαρτίαισι παῖδα σὸν κατακτάνης.
 ἢ δ' ἀφρὸν ἐξιεῖσα καὶ διαστρόφους
 κόρας ἐλίσσοις, οὐ φρονοῦσ' ἄχρη φρονεῖν,
 ἐκ Βακχίου κατείχεται, οὐδ' ἐπειθέ νιν.

(1114-1124)

His mother first began the holy rites of sacrifice and fell upon him. But he tore the crown from his hair, so that wretched Agave would recognize him and not kill him, and touching her cheek, he spoke: "It is I, look, mother, your own son Pentheus, whom you bore in the home of Echion. Have pity on me, O mother, and do not kill your son because of my faults." But she, spewing foam and rolling her twisted eyes, not thinking rightly as she ought to think, possessed by Bacchus, was not persuaded by him.

This is most evidently a demonstration of the god's power over Agave, giving her the delusion that Pentheus is an animal for the *sparagmos*. The messenger focuses on the signs of her divine madness, the foam and rolling eyes, and attributes Pentheus' death to his mother being out of her right mind. But as Pentheus is the mortal at the heart of the tragedy, and in fact Agave has not even appeared yet onstage, it is important to read it from the perspective of his maenadism as well. Pentheus realizes that the ivy crown of his costume has made him unrecognizable to his mother, and he removes it to reveal himself to her. But he cannot so simply undo the transformation that has been effected by his participation in the rites. He has been marked as Dionysus' and proclaimed himself as an offering to the god. Although Agave seems mad to the outside observer, and acts against her sober will, she is completing what Pentheus, himself influenced by the god, began.

The Theban maenads of *Bacchae* also experience the transformative power of Dionysian worship, though in a less permanent and devastating way. Messengers report that they escape

from chains and prisons spontaneously (447-48); they summon springs of water, wine, milk, and honey (704-11); they tear apart cattle with their bare hands (735-47); they drive back armed men with only their *thyrsoi* (761-64); they uproot a towering fir-tree (1109-10). The first messenger reports that they perform these wonders “not without some god” (οὐκ ἄνευ θεῶν τινοῦς, 764); the second, that they are “maddened with the god’s breath” (θεοῦ πνοαῖσιν ἐμμανεῖς, 1094). Most strikingly, they are said to bear flames in their hair which do not harm them: “in their locks they carried fire, and did not burn” (ἐπὶ δὲ βοστρύχοις / πῦρ ἔφερον, οὐδ’ ἔκαεν, 757-58). A flame at the tragedy’s start burns as proof of Zeus’ divinity and Semele’s association with him and flares in recognition of Dionysus’ divinity during the “palace miracle.” The chorus tells of Bacchus carrying a flaming torch among his maenads (144-47). And a final bolt of light accompanies Dionysus’ address to his maenads setting them on Pentheus to destroy him. Given this consistent association of fire with Dionysus, the flame in his maenads’ hair must be understood as a sign of Dionysus’ divine presence, his possession of the maenads.

The fire of Zeus that destroys Semele causes Dionysus to be born undeveloped and sewn into his father’s thigh. By necessitating this unusual gestation, the fire of Zeus’ epiphany to Semele leads to Dionysus’ divinization. Now come to seek his rightful honors as a god from the Thebans, Dionysus uses flame in his own escalating series of epiphanies as proof of his divinity. The maenads with the flaming hair function collectively as a new Semele, bearing Dionysus and the divine flame and leading to his legitimization as a god. Semele is utterly consumed and destroyed by the lightning of Zeus, as is her family’s home. The maenads are explicitly not consumed by their flame, nor is Pentheus’ palace. But the final vindication of Dionysus comes at the expense of the metaphorical destruction of the royal house of Thebes and the devastation of

Agave, leader of the Theban maenads.²⁶⁰ And as Semele's tomb is made a sanctuary and continues to smolder with the divine flame, memorializing the first birth and the divinization of Dionysus, the flaming rampage of the Theban maenads contributes to the establishment of the god's cult at Thebes, memorializing his epiphany. Their Bacchic rites therefore transform both them and the god.

That Dionysus is meaningfully affected by the rites he oversees is clear from the way he uses them in his revenge against Thebes and from how he speaks of the rites in both the prologue and the epilogue. It is not unusual for a 'scorned god' to demand ritual honors from those who have refused. In *Hippolytus*, for example, Aphrodite exacts revenge on the title character for ignoring her due to his single-minded devotion to Artemis. But Aphrodite accomplishes her goal from a distance with a little prompting to set things in motion. Furthermore, she does not force Hippolytus to participate in any ritual activity but simply destroys him. Dionysus, in contrast, demands rites. As Burnett notes, in fact, he does not plan a specific revenge in his prologue but rather the institution of his rites (1970, 18): "it is necessary for the city to understand, even if they are unwilling, about being uninitiated in my bacchic rites" (δεῖ γὰρ πόλιν τήνδ' ἐκμαθεῖν, κεί μὴ θέλει, / ἀτέλεστον οὔσαν τῶν ἐμῶν βακχευμάτων, 39-40). He drives the entire female population of Thebes to form a *thiasos* in the mountains, persuades Pentheus to dress as a maenad and follow them, and brings about their mutual destruction through their participation in his rites.

The ritual participation, or refusal of participation, in Dionysian cult is crucial for Dionysus' success in his return to Greece as a god. He has established his divinity in Asia, where

²⁶⁰ Castellani reads the destruction of the royal family as the metaphorical destruction of the palace (1976, 67-75).

his initiations and revels demonstrate that he is “manifestly a god to mortals” (ἐμφάνης δαίμων βροτοῖς, 22), and he plans to continue revealing his divinity by establishing rites elsewhere in Greece. It is the ritual observances in his honor that serve as proof of his status, and so he places great importance in them, encouraging others to participate in rites and prayers to himself. He commands the chorus to beat their drums about the palace of Pentheus (56-61) and urges Pentheus to sacrifice to the god (794-95). The chorus relates him calling to the bacchantes to “sing songs for Dionysus” (μέλπετε τὸν Διόνυσον, 155). Because of his mission to prove himself as a god, the refusal of Pentheus and Thebes to participate in his rites does not merely anger him, but causes him significant harm. Cadmus recognizes this in the epilogue: “he suffered terrible things at our hands, having a name without honors in Thebes” (ἔπασχεν δεινὰ πρὸς ὑμῶν, / ἀγέραστον ἔχων ὄνομ’ ἐν Θήβαις, 1377-78). The lack of ritual observance means for Dionysus a lack of recognition as a god; in a sense, it is an attack on his divinity. By compelling, encouraging, and vindicating his rites Dionysus defends his own status and makes himself a god in Thebes.

The transformative powers of Dionysian ritual are linked with the original transformation of Dionysus himself from mortal to god. In the birth narrative of Dionysus told in *Bacchae*, Semele is entirely destroyed by the power of Zeus’ divine form; Dionysus is saved and made divine by Zeus piecing together his thigh as a womb.²⁶¹ Other myths of the god’s origins tell of him being torn to pieces and cooked or consumed raw and later pieced back together; these mythic elements parallel the *sparagmos* and *omophagia* of mythical maenads (Seaford 1981, 266-67). Through these gory rituals the maenads of *Bacchae* re-enact the experiences of the god

²⁶¹ Notably, Zeus is also transformed in a small way by gestating Dionysus, taking on a major attribute of womanhood. Buxton sees ‘motherhood’ as Zeus’ defining feature in *Bacchae*, but cautions that it is a partial femininity; he takes on the function, but not the form or dress, of a woman (2009, 235).

and thus identify more closely with him (Dodds 1960, xvii-xx). As a pretended participant himself, Dionysus also re-enacts his original transformation from mortal to divine, and through his followers' rites he achieves a fuller divinity. He has already crossed that all-but-uncrossable divide between mortal and god. Now he alters his status further with the help of his rituals, from unknown, denied, doubted, refused god to recognized, established, proven, feared god.

Pentheus' quasi-initiation at the hands of Dionysus transforms the king into a compliant maenad of Dionysus and the god's sacrificial victim, unrecognizable as himself. It also fashions him into the visual double of Dionysus, with the same hair and thyrsus that Pentheus earlier draws attention to in his mockery of the Lydian's appearance.²⁶² But Dionysus' appearance is also changed, though not literally to the audience. Pentheus sees a vision that reveals to him (though he fails to recognize it) the divine identity of the Lydian stranger: "you seem to be a bull leading on before me, and there seem to be horns grown on your head. But were you a beast before? For you are like a bull" (ταῦρος ἡμῖν πρόσθεν ἡγεῖσθαι δοκεῖς / καὶ σῶ κέρατα κρατὶ προσπεφυκέναι. / ἀλλ' ἦ ποτ' ἦσθα θήρ; τεταύρωσαι γὰρ οὖν, 920-22). The Lydian affirms that Pentheus is now seeing as he should, and that the god is present (923-24). Pentheus' experience of Dionysian rites and his ritual costume lead to a partial epiphany by Dionysus. Just as Pentheus' dress and speech in this scene foreshadow his destruction as a sacrificial offering by the maenads, they also foreshadow the full revelation of Dionysus as a god *ex machina*. Pentheus as initiand and Dionysus as the leader of the initiation are mutually transformed by their participation.

²⁶² For Pentheus and Dionysus as doubles see for instance Seaford 1994, 282-88 and Foley 129-30. For Pentheus' comments on the Lydian's appearance see 240-41, 455, 493-95; Kalke 1985, 413.

As Thebes progresses toward ritual acknowledgement of Dionysus in *Bacchae*, the god reveals himself with increasing clarity and force. The participation of mortals in Dionysian ritual and the certainty of his divine status seem to be closely linked. Dionysus appears first at stage level and in mortal disguise. Having established that the women of Thebes are engaged in maenadic revels in the mountains outside the city, he first reveals his divine power from within the palace through an earthquake, flame, and his divine voice. The chorus recognizes him – Pentheus does not – but neither connects the god to the Lydian stranger. Soon Pentheus assumes the ritual costume of the god’s followers. He then sees the Lydian as a bull, the divine form of the ‘bull-horned’ Dionysus (cf. 100), though he does not understand it. Next Pentheus is led through the city in ritual procession and taken to the maenads, and when he is revealed to them atop a fir tree the voice and flame of Dionysus once more announce his divinity to his followers. Finally, with the *sparagmos* of Pentheus achieved and the ritual observances complete, the epiphany of Dionysus is also made complete with his appearance *ex machina* to vindicate himself and proclaim the consequences for those who denied him his honors. Although there is no reason to believe there would have been any change in Dionysus’ costume for the final scene, the stark change from his stage-level prologue appearance and second entry as Pentheus’ prisoner to his appearance above the stage in his divine glory speaks to the transformation of the god over the course of the play.²⁶³

The text also transitions away from referring to Dionysus’ mortal parentage by Semele, and towards references to his divinity and his divine father Zeus. Semele, named so frequently in

²⁶³ For the absence of costume change see Foley 1980, 127-28. For the force of the final appearance *ex machina* after stage-level appearances throughout see Mastrorarde 1990, 273.

the first 600 lines of the text, is never named again in what survives.²⁶⁴ In the epilogue he is manifestly the divine son of Zeus, and he emphasizes this repeatedly. He tells the Thebans “I say these things to you not as Dionysus, not born of a mortal father, but of Zeus” (ταῦτ’ οὐχὶ θνητοῦ πατρὸς ἐκγεγῶς λέγω / Διόνυσος, ἀλλὰ Ζηνός, 1340-41). He then repeats that he is the son of Zeus (1342), that he is a god (1347), and that Zeus is his father (1349). Gone is the ambiguous status, gone the vested interest in his mortal mother’s honor, gone the mortal disguise and the participation among his followers in his own rites. As Foley puts it, the same god who transgresses boundaries restores and reaffirms them (1980, 126). The Dionysus of the epilogue is removed, dominating, unquestionably divine.

The overpowering divinity of Dionysus at the play’s conclusion is tempered slightly by the words of Cadmus in criticism of the god’s actions: “it is not befitting the gods to be the same as mortals in their anger” (ὀργὰς πρέπει θεοῦς οὐχ ὁμοιοῦσθαι βροτοῖς, 1348). Kalke and Segal both note the importance of this criticism for our understanding of Dionysus’ nature (1985, 424; 1999-2000, 289-91). Dionysus does not really answer the charge, deflecting vaguely to Zeus’ approval of the events. Many epilogue gods refer to the will of Zeus to explain events. But more than this, Dionysus uses this explanation as another reminder of his divinity, implicitly rejecting the charge that he is behaving too much like mortals. Cadmus is not unique among Euripidean mortals in voicing this criticism of gods; Heracles and Iphigenia both speak harshly about how the gods behave and Heracles in particular rejects the notion that gods would be like mortals. But Iphigenia speaks as the priestess of Artemis who will eventually be absorbed into her cult, and

²⁶⁴ As noted by Hamilton (1974, 145-57). It is of course possible that she is named in the lacuna near the conclusion, which includes much of Dionysus’ final speech, as Willink argues (1966, 46-49).

Heracles speaks as someone who will himself be counted among the gods who behave like him. Cadmus, on the other hand, speaks as a mortal to a god who, but for his gestation in Zeus' thigh, would be his mortal descendant. In doing so he raises a question to which Euripides gives no satisfactory answer: if the rituals of *Bacchae* facilitate Dionysus' progression to a fully divine epiphany, do they also leave him a little more like a mortal? He spends the majority of *Bacchae* "costumed for revenge," as Wohl puts it, and becomes mortal in the perception of those around him (2005, 144-46). The power of Dionysian costume to transform has been clearly demonstrated in *Bacchae*. Pentheus, dressing and acting like a maenad, unwittingly becomes one; does Dionysus, dressing and acting like a mortal, take on greater aspects of mortality?

Conclusion

From the history given in the prologue to the final epiphany of Dionysus in the epilogue, *Bacchae* displays the violent power of transformation that is an encounter with the divine. Semele is entirely consumed and remains only as a smoldering monument. Agave and Cadmus resist the Dionysian rites before joining, one by divine madness and the other voluntarily; Agave is transformed into the maenadic symbol and tool of the god, and Cadmus into a serpent. Pentheus dresses himself as a maenad and in doing so puts himself under the influence of Dionysus, transforming into a sacrifice to be torn apart by his mother and her fellow maenads. The prevalence of the theme of change through ritual is consistent with the cult of Dionysus, which produces an altered mental state in the Bacchic revels and promises a transition to knowledge, happiness, and closer identification with the god through ritual initiation in his mystery cult. It also reflects the nature of Dionysus, who transgresses boundaries, and his own history of transformation from mortal son of Zeus to god by being sewn in his father's thigh.

Dionysus' insistence on ritual acknowledgement, participation in his own rites, and use of his rites to control and transform others, all point to the importance of these transformative rites for the god himself. Over the course of *Bacchae* the god himself seems to transform, from unrecognized Lidian stranger to fully revealed god acknowledged by all. Without the honors of Thebes, Dionysus suffers; with the completed ritual observances of the city and its king, he is triumphant and manifestly divine. While the Dionysian rites have the undeniable power to transform worshippers, it seems in *Bacchae* that they likewise affect the god.

Conclusions

The triumphant affirmation of Dionysus' divinity at the end of *Bacchae* is the Euripidean religious system seen at its most extreme. Most mortals do not literally co-worship with their cult deity; most children of Zeus by mortal women do not enjoy divinity at all, much less from infancy. Most Euripidean characters do not see their status change as drastically or as visibly as those of Pentheus and Dionysus with their ritual disguises. The unusual nature of this tragedy's religious context, however, is not in quality but in degree. In claiming his divinity, participating in his *thiasos*, driving the Theban women into a frenzy, and leading the costumed Pentheus as a ritual victim in his cult's dress, Dionysus uses the ritual actions available to him to manipulate his status and affect the status of those around him. Through Dionysian rites the god both disguises himself as mortal and confirms himself as divine, crossing the divide with ease.

Other Euripidean heroes are not so unequivocally capable of movement in their status, nor so powerful in their use of religious actions. But they, too, move between mortality and divinity because of their participation in transformative rituals, and they find new abilities to influence their circumstances based on their changed status. Heracles, like Dionysus, is a son of Zeus with a mortal woman who is eventually counted among the Olympians. But unlike Dionysus, who appears as a god in mortal disguise, Heracles appears in both *HF* and *Alcestis* as a still-mortal in the context of his Labors. His intermediacy is made apparent in his ability to wrestle Thanatos, his victories in the Labors and the Gigantomachy, and most prominently in the presence of the two altars to Zeus in *HF*. The structural and verbal parallels to Apollo in *Alcestis* and the attack by Iris and Lyssa in *HF* set the hero opposite an unusually-timed divine appearance in both tragedies. These gods do not resolve, but rather create or continue, the crisis of the tragedies. Heracles and other mortals are left to resolve the situation. While Heracles does

not have the full power of a divinity, Euripides makes it clear that Apollo, Iris, and Lyssa are limited as well in their ability to respond to their circumstances. Apollo can only offer a trade of deaths to Admetus, not a complete escape, and he fails to persuade or threaten Thanatos to delay Alcestis' death. Iris and Lyssa are subject to the will of Hera, despite the clear objections of Lyssa; and even Zeus and Hera, the powers fighting each other using Heracles as a proxy, each lack total control because of the interference of the other.

The mortal characters, though not as advantaged in status as Heracles or Dionysus, demonstrate the same ability to interact with the gods and respond to their circumstances using rituals and their own particular status. Alcestis affirms her role as wife and mother through household rituals and oaths that preserve her memory and earn her promises of a hero's honors after her death. She has no power to keep her life once she has traded it, but she takes an active ritual role in her death such that she seems to hang between the worlds of the living and the dead, suspending the ending which the more-capable Heracles will soon reverse more completely. Iphigenia, through her status as priestess of Artemis and the goddess' claimed and rescued sacrificial victim, demonstrates an even greater ability to respond to her circumstances through religious ritual. She wields the authority not only to direct rites, but to confidently invent them to suit her purpose. And through the purification she enacts to allow her to escape with Orestes and Pylades, Iphigenia also explicitly affects the goddess she serves. Artemis, like Orestes and Pylades, is purified from her association with human sacrifice, returned to Greece, and reunited with her brother by the theft of the Taurian cult image.

These represent some of the greatest instances of the importance of religious status and ritual in the four tragedies discussed. But they are far from a complete summary. Nearly every character and relationship draws on these two elements of the Euripidean religious system. They

inform the significance of the altars of Zeus in *HF* and the tomb of Semele in *Bacchae*, the dream of Iphigenia and the trials of Orestes, the punishment of Apollo, the unhelpfulness of Thanatos, Iphigenia's doubts about Artemis' sacrifices and Heracles' rejection of poets' tales of the gods. As Euripides' mortal characters find their way through a world in which their abilities are often dependent on and overpowered by divine wills, fate, or the nebulous *daimon*, they nevertheless find the ability to respond and adapt through their own roles in the rituals that link their mortal world with the divine one.

The four tragedies in this study stand out in the extant Euripidean corpus because their mortal characters demonstrate exceptional ritual influence, the gods appear and interact in a manner notably unlike other extant dramas of Euripides, and the boundaries between mortal and divine are clearly shown to be moved and broken. Although the examples studied may be especially conducive to understanding the religious framework used by Euripides, this is not to say that his other tragedies lack the same framework. The approach demonstrated in these chapters is one that can guide a reading of any Euripidean drama and assist in understanding how Euripides uses the rituals and statuses it contains to shape his plot and themes.

It is all too easy to declare, in response to an assessment of Euripides, that the tragedian portrays the triumph of human *mores* in the face of pitiless, detached gods; or that he reaffirms the inevitability of the divine plan; or that he urges his audiences to question the notion of the Greek pantheon altogether. But the picture developed in the examination of religious status and ritual in his plays is far more dynamic, if less tidy. The scales between gods and mortals may well be unbalanced, as divine powers far exceed mortal and even lesser gods cede to the will of greater ones. But Euripides shows again and again the spaces in which extraordinary mortals,

and at times more ordinary ones in extraordinary circumstances, shift the balance and transcend – whether for a moment or forever – the boundaries that separate them.

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