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Divine reverence in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Bacchae*.

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Abstract

Historically, humans have demonstrated a persistent attraction to the “unknown”—that which they cannot fully comprehend or attribute to natural causes. This disposition led to the birth of supernatural entities, generating a framework through which both natural phenomena and human fortunes were interpreted. Hence, in the ancient Greek consciousness, lightning was not viewed as the result of colliding clouds, but as the work of Zeus, just as the plague that decimated the Achaeans in the Troad was ascribed to the wrath of Apollo. In attempting to explain natural phenomena, blessings, or misfortunes, humans thus invented the concept of “god”. The existence of deities is evident in cult traditions predating ancient Greek civilization, ranging from beneficial Olympian gods to eerie figures like Lamia. The veneration of the divine—oscillating

between profound reverence and existential horror—emerges as a direct corollary of human fascination with the indeterminate. This ontological tension is rooted in the perceived disparity between mortal limitations and the absolute nature of the gods, who serve as transcendent benchmarks of an excellence that, while aesthetically and ethically alluring, remains inherently inaccessible and potentially threatening to the human condition. Given the centrality of “morality” to this discussion, it is necessary to clarify its correlation with the religious system under examination. Among the various views on the relationship between religion and ethics, the account of Hugh Lloyd-Jones stands out; he argues that a culture's morals must be sought within its underlying religious framework. Consequently, evaluating the ancient Greek polytheistic system through the lens of modern monotheistic mechanisms, such as Christianity, fails to grasp what is truly at stake.¹ Naturally, divine intervention is deeply embedded in ancient Greek literature, especially drama. This paper examines the patterns through which respect for the divine is manifested in three tragedies by Euripides—*Hippolytus*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and *Bacchae*—exploring their similarities and differences in highlighting this reverence.

Key Words: Euripides, Hippolytus, Iphigenia, Aulis, Bacchae, drama, tragedy, divine, reverence.

¹ Lloyd-Jones (2001) 456.

Hippolytus

Hippolytus is a tragedy by Euripides that was first performed in 428 BC, earning the poet first prize. Just three years prior, the Peloponnesian War had broken out, while the plague was decimating the population. It is a tragedy that strongly reflects the socio-political concerns of the contemporary citizen-spectator, combining them with the poet's own political and philosophical pursuits. Within the context of exploring how reverence for the divine is manifested in *Hippolytus*, it is worth clarifying that a polytheistic system, such as that of the ancient Greeks, by no means permits exclusive devotion to a single deity. Rather, maintaining a balanced distance from all gods and avoiding a singular, mystical relationship with just one is, paradoxically, the ultimate sign of respect toward the pantheon as a whole.

Right from the outset of the play, the young Hippolytus is shown praying to Artemis, hoping to end his life exactly as he began it—defined by this unadulterated and intimate spiritual connection with the goddess. This wish is fulfilled through a circular narrative arc: even at the moment of his death, he enjoys this mutual respect, maintaining the privilege of direct, unmediated contact that encompasses not only conversation but also the olfactory perception of the divine presence.² Hippolytus is portrayed as a pious and pure young man who abhors marriage and love. Purity is a central motif in the play; however, the term *ἀγνός* is differentiated depending on the broader conceptual framework in which it appears. As Segal aptly points out: “with this interest in overlapping word meanings that he shares with the Sophists, Thucydides, Aristophanes, and Socrates, Euripides exploits various notions of purity to explore more deeply the moral dilemmas he raises and the complexity of our moral judgments in general”. In verse 102, Hippolytus alludes to a transcendent kind of purity, which he has just elaborated metaphorically and symbolically through the image of the *ἀκήρατον λειμῶνα* from which he offers his garland to the goddess. While such a concept of purity is familiar from a Christian perspective, it remains foreign to an audience for whom purity primarily carried cultic and ritualistic significance.³

² Gould (2018) 385; Eur. Hipp. 1391–1394.

³ Segal (1970) 279.

While such a choice might be deemed commendable today, it was viewed far differently in ancient Greece.⁴ Indeed, the drama navigates the fine line between piety and irreverence within a polytheistic framework. Although Hippolytus' rejection of sexuality is referenced early in the Prologue, Euripides does not explicitly state the reasons behind it. This aligns with the “subtle economy of art” of which Freud speaks. By withholding the exact motives that impel the pious young man to renounce love, the poet “forces us to fill them in; he engages our intellectual activity, deflects it from critical reflection, and keeps us firmly identified with the hero. A clumsy man in his place would have given conscious expression to all that he wishes to reveal to us, and would thus have been confronted with our cool and unbridled intelligence, which would preclude any deepening of illusion.”⁵

In *Hippolytus*, reverence is clearly manifested through three distinct prayers, unfolding in parallel with the protagonist's increasingly evident demise. The “unanswered” prayer of the servant in front of the statue of Aphrodite, asking the goddess to overlook the youth's arrogance, reinforces the aforementioned view.⁶ The servant prays to Aphrodite on behalf of Hippolytus, concluding his supplication with the sentiment that the gods ought to be wiser than mortals. This underscores that a key pursuit of the tragedy is the acquisition of wisdom rather than a debate over the existence or powers of the gods.⁷ Later, in verses 522–523, the nurse invokes Cypris when seeking ingredients to create the love potion.⁸ The prayers in Euripides' *Hippolytus* constitute a vital part of the tragedy, to the extent that their structural anomalies have often led scholars to question the authenticity of these verses. For instance, features of the structure of Theseus' prayer are also found in Euripides' *Rhesus*. However, our primary focus rests on the words with which the Chorus concludes.⁹ This appeal to a daimon refers to a vague, unspecified deity—something unusual for the religious practices of ordinary ancient Greeks—and therefore such prayers and supplications rarely found a clear recipient.

⁴ purity as part of the ritual is linked to the entrance of the believer into the sacred place of worship, in order to avoid contamination of the place by any kind of physical pollution. The dimension of purity which Hippolytus introduces is unknown to the Athenian public until Hellenistic times. See Barrett (1964) 172.

⁵ Freud (1916) 315.

⁶ Eur. Hipp. 114 – 117.

⁷ Mikalson (1989) 81 – 98.

⁸ Eur. Hipp. 522 – 523.

⁹ Eur. Hipp. 870 – 873.

Already in the Prologue through Aphrodite's monologue, Hippolytus' disrespect toward her is emphasized, as the hero explicitly honours Artemis more by offering her a wreath. The poet's choice to narrate the circumstances and transgresses acceptable boundaries when he brushes the servant aside, thereby instigating a fatal conflict. The poet's choice to narrate the circumstances and the development of the myth in the Prologue through the mouth of a god who, appearing *ἀπό μηχανῆς*, either arbitrarily determines the course of the case, as in *Hippolytus*, or predicts the future.¹⁰ Does this, however, come into conflict with the prevailing intellectual skepticism of the fifth century and the accusations of atheism leveled against Euripides? Probably not, considering that the poet's last tragedy, *Bacchae*, is a deeply religious work featuring Dionysus himself as the protagonist, where divine power acts as the constitutive principle governing the balance of the world. The Chorus describes Aphrodite's plan of punishment, pointing out the dire straits in which Phaedra—wife of Hippolytus' father, Theseus, and stepmother of Hippolytus—finds herself. As the Chorus characteristically states in the first antistrophe, Phaedra remains shut up in her chamber, seeking death by starvation because of the emotional anguish caused by Hippolytus' failure to respond to her love.¹¹

Euripides' ingenuity is made even more evident through his dramaturgy when he presents Phaedra on stage bedridden and fully collapsed. Aphrodite, therefore, uses the sinful love she has instilled in Phaedra as an instrument of revenge against Hippolytus. The imperative need for reverence is further highlighted through Phaedra's note to Theseus.¹² Any argument brought forward by Hippolytus, however sincere, could in no way outweigh the words of the dead woman. Theseus feels compelled to respect his wife's last words and believe the accusations of rape; to do otherwise would constitute irreverence toward the gods and the deceased.¹³ Through this rigid adherence to piety, Theseus ironically precipitates the very catastrophe he

¹⁰ according to Nietzsche, Euripides' introduction of the *ἀπό μηχανῆς θεοῦ* into tragedy destroys tragedy, since it downgrades the Chorus, the predominantly Dionysian element of the genre, thus negating the tragic nature of the human impasse, the essence of tragedy.

¹¹ Eur. Hipp. 139 – 140.

¹² in Euripides' surviving fragmentary tragedy, *Ἰππόλυτος Καλυπτόμενος*, Phaedra herself confesses her love to Hippolytus. Much concern has been raised by the line “τί δ', ἦν λυθείς με διαβάλης, παθεῖν σε δεῖ”, which has led many scholars to speak of the extraction of an oath from Hippolytus by Phaedra herself. For an oath to *Ἰππόλυτος Καλυπτόμενος* see Hutchinson (2004) 22.

¹³ Of particular interest are the verses 1082–1084 by Hippolytus and the reference to the term “νόθος”. The description attributed to the hero is “παῖς Ἀμαζόνος”, not “son of Theseus”. Rankin identifies in him an imprint of the ideological background of 5th century society. The social stigmatisation of the bastards impinges directly on the psyche of Hippolytus, who, in a moment of intense emotion, refers to his birth—the only one he makes to it in the whole play.

sought to avert. After Phaedra's suicide, Theseus, in his meeting with Hippolytus, hurls abusive insults at his son, even questioning his vaunted piety. The culmination of the discussion of divine reverence in *Hippolytus* is the oath. When he is informed of Phaedra's forbidden love, the young man takes a vow of silence, swearing never to reveal anything to anyone—a binding pledge that prevents him from exposing the truth to Theseus, ironically due to his own steadfast godliness.

It is not unlikely, however, that it was his own piety that led him to waver between revealing the unholy secret and keeping his oath. Despite his pledge to remain silent, Hippolytus notoriously claims that it was his tongue that swore the oath, not his mind—a declaration that, in itself, has been viewed as a form of disrespect. Furthermore, in a fit of rage, Hippolytus nullifies the very value of women, wishing for the perpetuation of the human race without their biological participation. Hippolytus is not the only character bound by a vow; the Chorus does likewise. In verses 713–714, the women of the Chorus are shown swearing to Artemis that they will never bring Phaedra's misfortunes to light.¹⁴ The Nurse, acting as a vehicle for Aphrodite's destructive plan, exploits a deft manipulation of language through her suggestion to Phaedra regarding the magical potion. As Fletcher observes, the suggestion of a magical antidote serves as a precursor to the revelation of events to Hippolytus. However, in her acumen, the Nurse first manages to elicit an oath from him.

The fulfillment of this oath, the tragic consequences of which both Hippolytus and the audience are initially unable to foresee, functions similarly to Aegeus' blind oath to Medea, performing the same structural function in the succession of verbal acts.¹⁵ The oath of the Chorus plays a crucial role in the outcome of the drama and the death of Hippolytus, since the imperative to respect the divine prevents the Coryphaeus from revealing the truth to Theseus, thereby sealing the fate of the king's son. During the confrontation between father and son, when the latter—bound by his initial oath—is unable to vindicate himself, he takes a second oath. This oath of innocence fulfills all the criteria of ritual swearing in antiquity: he invokes the divine, asserts his innocence, and finally curses himself in the event of perjury. In a desperate attempt to convince Theseus, Hippolytus defends his virtue¹⁶, declaring that if he lies, he should die exiled

¹⁴ Eur. Hipp. 713 – 714.

¹⁵ Fletcher (2003) 37; Hippolytus' vow of silence, according to Zeitlin (1996) 260, reflects the “condition of physical restraint imposed by the denial of love”.

¹⁶ Eur. Hipp. 1025–1027.

and stateless.¹⁷ However, all his efforts are in vain until he realizes that there is no way to convince his father; his punishment and death appear inevitable. Yet, as John Gould points out, ancient Greek religion was by no means a system of punishment entirely monopolized by the Olympian gods. Therefore, if ancient Greek religion is—as research indicates—deeply relational, human behavior plays an equally critical role. Hippolytus' choice to devote himself exclusively to a single goddess constitutes hubris. In this light, the reaction of the Chorus is particularly telling once they witness these unfolding events; they seek the source of the affliction not on Olympus, but in the waters, the mountains, and the rocks, focusing instead on wilder, localized forces like Pan, Corybantes, Hecate, and Dictynna.¹⁸

Therefore, in examining how reverence for the divine emerges, it would be foolhardy at first sight to claim that Euripides pursues a balanced piety solely because the fates of the heroes are determined by higher powers and contrast with their royal lineage. After all, how can we argue that the gods determine mortal fate completely arbitrarily when the catalyst for this chain of punishment is Hippolytus' own religious bias? Or how can we speak unconditionally of “victims of the gods” when Phaedra, frustrated by a divinely induced love, resorts to an act that can only be described as impious, forsaking the greatest gift that gods offer? Through this cycle of disrespect and punishment, human values, moral virtues, divine will, and the imposition of retribution are reinterpreted within a web of structures and ultimately shape the drama itself.

¹⁷ Eur. Hipp. 1029.

¹⁸ Gould (2018) 387.

Iphigenia in Aulis

Euripides' tragedy *Iphigenia in Aulis* was performed in 405 BC, a year after the tragic poet's death, and is part of a trilogy along with the plays *Bacchae* and *Alcmaeon in Corinth*. It focuses on the Achaean leader's decision to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to Artemis, after being urged by the seer Calchas to turn the windlessness into wind and set sail for Troy. Artemis occupies an important place in the play, and respect toward her permeates the drama. Mythological tradition holds that Artemis, in addition to being a goddess of the hunt, oversees all stages of the earthly world, from the protection of animals to the childhood of man as Artemis Iphigenia, especially during childbirth. Of particular interest is verse 676 of the Suppliants: “Ἄρτεμιν δ' ἑκάταν γυναικῶν λόχους ἐφορεύειν”. Iphigenia is therefore one of Artemis' religious substitutes. The close connection between Artemis and Iphigenia is also evident from the etymological analysis of her name: ἱφι-γένεια, ἱφι+γίγνομαι: she who was born strong or the goddess who encourages women during childbirth. Versions linking the goddess to the main protagonist of the myth vary if someone looks back to the rich and long tradition concerning Iphigenia.¹⁹ Any attempt to approach the ritual of sacrifice as the imposition of a punitive attitude on the part of the goddess toward Agamemnon for killing her sacred stag or for breaking his promise, as well as any attempt to relate it harmoniously to the apnea that afflicts the Greek fleet assembled in Aulis, exhibits inherent weaknesses. So too is inherent, in the goddess' demand, the danger that the Trojan expedition, an action aimed at all Greeks, will not be carried out due to an offence committed by Agamemnon.

If assumed that the ships of the Achaeans were gathered in Aulis for the purpose of another punishment, it becomes readily apparent that respect for the goddess may override the action of another divine will.²⁰ The fact, however, that Euripides not only accepted all these elements of the myth but presented them from his own perspective the attribution of respect, demonstrates that the poet saw behind the surface of the myth.²¹ In Artemis' dilemma he did not discern the possibility of the campaign not

¹⁹ For further information on the presence of Iphigenia in the myth, see Kovacs 2010; Gliksohn 2015; Sourvinou-Inwood 2015; Marshall 1994; Kyriakou 2006; Markantonatos 2012.

²⁰ Ευστρατιάδης (1985) 13.

²¹ In his article “Zeus the Father and Heracles the Son in Tragedy,” Mikalson, referring to the relationship between divine will and human expectation, concludes: “In order to find the solution, Euripides goes beyond myth and even cult, penetrating the field of recent and current philosophical concerns.” See Mikalson 1986, 98.

materializing, but rather the creation of the necessary conditions for its favorable outcome. In the Aeschylean version several factors pressure Agamemnon to accept Iphigenia's sacrifice: Zeus' command that the Greeks avenge Paris' violation of hospitality, the announcement of Artemis' oracle by Calchas which demands the sacrifice, the willingness of the troops, and of course Agamemnon's own desire to conquer Troy. In *Iphigenia in Aulis*, however, Artemis presents Calchas not with an order, but with a choice. Verses 89–93 suggest that it lies in the choice of the Greeks to sacrifice Iphigenia. If they sacrifice her, they will sail to Troy. If not, then they will simply turn back. In this particular play, the divine command takes the form of choice. In this way Euripides raises moral concerns in his audience. Foley notes that without the oracle the vision of a Panhellenic Idea would have been impossible to realize: “the heartless oracle suddenly creates a structure that allows for a transition from a situation characterized by political corruption and foolish strife to an atmosphere more oriented toward public concerns”.²²

The need to respect the goddess here lies in Agamemnon's dual role, that of commander-in-chief of the Greeks and that of a father. The paternal instinct had to be overcome by a transcendent power that would force a conflict between Agamemnon's ambition and the desire to save his daughter.²³ If Artemis' dilemma was not posed against these two forces, Agamemnon would probably not have accepted Iphigenia's sacrifice.²⁴ But let us not forget that a tragedy is not just a myth meant to please the audience, but a work with a political background, directly influenced by the social reality of its author. Athens is in perhaps the worst position in its history and the future looks bleak. The existence of the euripidean version of the myth helps us to better understand the concept of necessity and, by extension, the necessity of

²² Foley 1985, 93.

²³ The view that the primary factor shaping the final attitude of the Greek commander-in-chief is not the will of the goddess but the pressure of the troops has many supporters within the academic community. In this view, however, Siegel identifies a remarkable inherent weakness: the army does not know why *Iphigenia is in Aulis* (lines 425–432), nor do they know of Calchas' oracle, which only Menelaus and Odysseus are aware of until two-thirds of the play has passed (around line 1338). By that time, Agamemnon has already left the scene, meaning the army's opinion does not influence his decision. See Siegel 1981, 258.

²⁴ The importance of a hero making a decision is a recurring motif found in other tragedies, with the most characteristic examples being Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, and Euripides' *Medea*. Many scholars have argued for two necessary criteria to deem a decision appropriate for tragedy. On the one hand, the hero must be free to make the choice, independent of the dictates of divine will—or mythological tradition, as Sorum adds—and on the other hand, the hero must accept full responsibility for the final outcome, whether favorable or not. See Sorum 1992, 528.; Refining Snell's theories, Rosenmeyer emphasizes the importance of necessity in tragedy compared to epic poetry, noting that epic allows more room for free will. See Rosenmeyer 1978, 1–24.

maintaining a pious attitude toward the gods. The Athenians' resistance to the Spartans was an act of necessity, as was the Greeks' resistance to the Persians. A way had to be found to give the notion of the necessity of reverence for the divine the character of a full justification of sacrifice, which could only be possible if Iphigenia accepted and justified the necessity of her sacrifice. This justification, however, would have to be linked to the poet's ideology, thus acquiring a symbolic dimension. Despite the poet's great disappointment, the democratic ideal was deeply rooted in his consciousness. From the very first verses of the play, the seer Calchas conveys to Agamemnon the command of Artemis through his oracle.²⁵ First, then, the “servant” of the goddess himself seems to be “forced” to obey her advice, acting as her messenger. Of particular interest is the dialogue between the two brothers, Menelaus and Agamemnon, who, being victims of the will of the goddesses, are called upon to respect their dictates despite the strong desire of the former to campaign to save his wife and the latter not to sacrifice his daughter.

It would not be extreme to claim that reverence in this case works in a contradictory way: Agamemnon's respect for Artemis automatically means the loss of his own child but the salvation of his brother's wife.²⁶ The brothers' quarrel culminates in an abhorrent formulation, since they would not hesitate to kill the representative of the goddess.²⁷ This conversion, which is often shown by Euripidean heroes—most notably by Iphigenia herself, who is led to the altar of her own free will²⁸—and the criticism they do not hesitate to make of divine decisions and actions, such as Achilles or Clytemnestra, are due to the fact that the tragic poet was ideologically aligned with the Sophists, without, however, depriving the gods of their greatness. A striking example of this conversion is Achilles²⁹ who, although he initially promises Clytemnestra to save Iphigenia, transcending the divine when he arrogantly declares

²⁵ Eur.*Iph.Aul.*89–91.

²⁶ Eur.*Iph.Aul.*389–390.

²⁷ Eur.*Iph.Aul.*519–520.

²⁸ The moral differentiation of Iphigenia from the other characters in the play is emphasized by Lush, who views the central heroine as a model of ethical conduct. Once her father has decided on her sacrifice, she is left with no choice. In accepting the situation, she realigns her identity: on the one hand, she could bear the stigma of being disobedient and cowardly; on the other hand, through her new socio-political alignment, she is granted the opportunity to act as a benefactor of Greece, upon which the political stability and freedom of her homeland depend (lines 1387–1391). See Lush 2015, 234.

²⁹ Walsh identifies a key difference between Homer's Achilles and Euripides' Achilles: although Euripides “borrows” the image of the volatile and inconsistent hero, placing it in a completely different context, he alters the way we perceive his heroism. For more on Achilles in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, see Walsh 1974, 241–248.

“θεὸς ἐγὼ πέφνυά σοι μέγιστος, οὐκ ὦν· ἀλλ’ ὅμως γενήσομαι”,³⁰ he ultimately participates in the preparation of the sacrifice for the good of the Achaeans. It is not only Achilles' attitude that indicates a form of political opportunism, but that of all the generals of the Greeks, since each one obeys the divine commands according to his personal interests and aspirations, expressing corresponding arguments on each occasion. Contrary to this self-interest is the final attitude of Iphigenia when she accepts her sacrifice for the sake of her country and its moral values.³¹ The heroine's piety is thus highlighted on the one hand, but a kind of indirect criticism of the divine is projected.³²

³⁰ Eur.*Iph.Aul.*973–974.

³¹ For McDonald, Iphigenia's decision encompasses an emotional rather than an intellectual universal. Her choice is not made to serve a lofty ideal, but out of love for her family, a factor that gives her a new dimension of heroism. See McDonald 1990, 84.; Eur.*Iph.Aul.*1395–1396.

³² Eur.*Iph.Aul.*1218–1219.

Bacchae

The play was written in 407 BC when Euripides was staying at the court of King Archelaus, but was performed by his son in 405 BC, a year after the tragic poet's death. It is the only surviving drama of antiquity in which Dionysus is presented in human form, thus symbolizing the drama of the god, which is also the drama of mortals. It is a play that has puzzled as few others, mainly because of the difficulties that arise in terms of interpretation.³³ This complexity can probably be ascribed to the poet's mature age—the “swan song” of the broad poetic output of the “most tragic of tragedians”, as he was referred to by Aristotle. Of particular interest is Euripides' approach to the religious element and the ways in which the need to respect the divine is highlighted through this purely religious drama. This quest is made all the more adventurous by the view of some scholars that *Bacchae* is the expression of an intellectual conversion of Euripides to traditional religion, thus renouncing the skeptical spirit of his hitherto rationalist course.³⁴

As in *Hippolytus*, so in *Bacchae*, the predominance of the transcendental and superlative element over human reason is strongly observed. When the external or divine element is mentioned, there could be no more striking example than Bacchus himself. Apart from its ritual role, the Chorus contributes substantially to the economy of the drama by being the god's fellow traveler in his struggle to establish the new cult. It is not only the inclusion of liturgical parts of the tragedy under the veil of the new religion that gives the play a religious character. It is also the *skeuē* (ritual attire and equipment)³⁵ of the play that connects the orchestra of the theater with the new religion and the life of the citizen-spectator.³⁶ By denying the worship of Dionysus, Pentheus automatically denies the god himself. As in the case of *Hippolytus*, man is a victim of his own abusive behavior, which stems from his detachment from and contempt for the divine. It is natural, therefore, that he should be led lawfully to his

³³ The question of interpreting the *Bacchae* is a vast issue that lies beyond the scope of this study. By way of illustration, see Willink 1966, 27–50, who refers to lines 35–43 as the most difficult to interpret in the play due to complications in meter, meaning, and syntax. For more on the interpretation of the *Bacchae*, see Levy 1972, 487–489; Gregory 1985, 23–31; Campbell 1956, 56–67. Regarding the introduction of Bacchic worship, Verdenius argues that in the phrase “ἀλλ’ ἐξ πάντων βούλεται τιμὰς ἔχειν κοινὰς, διαριθμῶν δ’ οὐδέν’ αὖξοσθαι θέλει,” Tiresias does not imply a quantitative connotation like Dodds: “Dionysiac worship was essentially collective”, but a qualitative one: “the god wants to be worshipped by anybody, whatever his status”. See Verdenius 1962, 342

³⁴ Decharme 1906, 63–64.

³⁵ Eur.*Bacch.* 176–177.

³⁶ Unlike Verrall, Phoutrides does not identify any cynical or mocking attitude in Euripides' *Bacchae*. Rather, “he has made his Choruses representatives of the Athenian populace that he might interpret rather than condemn the simple, passionate and impulsive world.” See Phoutrides 1916, 122.

own extinction. Right from the Prologue, Dionysus emphatically asserts his divine origin and imposes his worship on mortals, starting from his birthplace, Thebes.³⁷ The choice of the city cannot be considered merely accidental, since it is through Thebes that the twofold plan of enforcing respect for the new religion and taking revenge against his ancestral house gains substance. This revenge is directed particularly against Agave, who questioned his divine origin from Semele.³⁸ Of particular note is Dionysus' choice to introduce the new religion through the Maenads—women who, in a state of mania as their name suggests, adopt the god's words without question. With this finding, Euripides gives a character of universality and collectivity to the proclamation of the new religion, while eliminating any form of discrimination among believers.³⁹

The need to respect the divine is accentuated by the self-proclamation of the god as a general of the Maenads, in case the inhabitants of Thebes oppose him and resort to violence, but also by the endorsement of two persons of great prestige: the seer Tiresias and the mythical king of Thebes—grandfather of Dionysus and Pentheus—Cadmus. Their placement in the First Episode by Euripides favours the dramatic economy of the play, leading to the formation of an apologetic motif before the conflict between the two main characters of the play, Dionysus and Pentheus. The conversion of the two elders intensifies the need to conform to Bacchic worship and emphasizes the necessity for humans to obey divine commands. This reverence is reinforced by the prestige of Cadmus, representing the political element, and the widely accepted and respected figure of the seer, representing the priestly world.⁴⁰ So despite their admonitions to Pentheus and the unsubstantiated accusations hurled by the latter, there follow insults that intensify the tragic irony between the human imposition of punishment⁴¹ and the divine retribution of which Pentheus will be the recipient. This is a masterful use of figures of speech and narrative techniques by Euripides, with the common thread being the intensity of the hero's tragic character. It is not Pentheus who will sentence the effeminate stranger to death by stoning⁴²; rather

³⁷ Eur.*Bacch.*1–2.

³⁸ Eur.*Bacch.*2–3.

³⁹ A necessary clarification to be made is that the terms “collectivity” and “universality” refer not only to the intra-dramatic characters but also to the audience: “With his foreknowledge and his power to decide who knows what, the god acquires a narrative authority that elevates him to a level close to that of the poet. In this respect, Dionysus operates as a kind of metanarrational device that forces the audience to shift from the narrative to the authorial level.” See MacLeod 2006, 581.

⁴⁰ Nikolaidou-Arabatzi 2006, 356.

⁴¹ Eur.*Bacch.*239–241.

⁴² Eur.*Bacch.*355–357.

it is the Maenads who will dismember the former.

In the Second Episode, when Pentheus captures Dionysus, he ignores all the warning signs as well as the admonitions of the therapon who tries to bring him to his senses. The unquenchable flame of Semele's sanctuary and the god's vine in her temple, the meek and serene attitude of the captured god, as well as the inexplicable release of the Maenads, are signs which, combined with the constant contradictions, ironies, and reversals of fortune, render man powerless and insulting to a higher power, pushing him to his one and only punishment that disrespect for the divine brings: his self-destruction. In this effort to find ways to highlight respect for the divine in *Bacchae*, the concept of the miracle⁴³ occupies an important place. Euripides, through the eloquence and vividness of his description of miracles, defines the boundaries between piety and irreverence, between the magnificence of the gods and human pettiness. The demolition of the palace by the voice of Dionysus, the capture of a bull instead of Dionysus by Pentheus⁴⁴, the god's contempt for Pentheus, having escaped and walking free⁴⁵, and the image of the Maenads suckling wild animals while snakes touch their faces, expose Pentheus' hubristic attitude and validate the divine origin of the "stranger", bringing about a total reversal of roles. The persecuted victim of the impious Pentheus has now become his pursuer. It suffices to recall the words of the shepherd when describing the dismemberment of oxen by the Maenads at Cithaeron and their supernatural power to understand where the messenger's obvious admiration comes from.⁴⁶

Regarding the divinity of Dionysus, however, we must understand the initial reaction of Pentheus, who did not accept the god from the beginning. It would have been unreasonable for the ruler of the city to accept the words of a passerby so readily, especially when they carry such weight. Even after the god's *epiphaneia*, it could not be immediately apparent that the prisoner was indeed Dionysus.⁴⁷ Before the final punishment was inflicted on Pentheus, the god intervened and clouded the young king's judgment, resulting in *ate* and subsequently hubristic exposure. Through a series of contrasts and the escalation of the moral scheme, the tragedy culminates in

⁴³ The staging of the palace miracles has been a subject of extensive scholarly debate. See Dodds 1960; Goldhill 1986; Wiles 1988; Oranje 1984. As Fisher notes, "the palace miracles, while real for the audience as dramatic events, are also symbolic in the sense of being representations of the god's nature." See Fisher 1992, 188.

⁴⁴ Eur.*Bacch.* 618–619.

⁴⁵ Eur.*Bacch.* 636–637.

⁴⁶ Eur.*Bacch.* 769–770.

⁴⁷ Syropoulos (2003) 47.

the humiliation of the hero and the complete reversal of fortune. Bacchus convinces Pentheus to disguise himself as a maenad. This disguise, which is an integral part of the Dionysian cult, becomes the vehicle of punishment of the hero, who is transformed into exactly what he despises. The concept of travestissement (cross-dressing), beyond its functional dramatic part, also involves the ideology of Bacchic sacrificial worship. The hero, as the bearer of the worship of the god in his new garment, becomes the object of the sacrifice after his masculinity has disappeared. He who until recently was the epitome of manliness and was to lead the army in the war against the stranger, agrees to ascend the mountain to meet his end.⁴⁸ Respect for the divine is therefore highlighted significantly through—and by—the complete reversal, whereby Dionysus imposes himself on Pentheus. The effeminate, meek, and subsequently imprisoned Dionysus is transformed into an imposing, cruel, and punishing presence that determines the fate of mortals. In contrast, Pentheus undergoes a reverse transformation, losing his virility and prestige. Through the ritual of cross-dressing, a supernatural transformation takes place, taking over the hero's personality; he now adopts qualities and characteristics that had previously been denied: femininity instead of masculinity, emotion instead of reason, and illusion and deception instead of intellectual clarity.⁴⁹

Dionysus represents nature itself, being the closest of the Olympian gods to man, since his form constantly changes, blurring the boundaries between beast and god. Without his presence, human existence is ineffective and incomplete. The denial of the god inherent in nature, earth, entertainment, and life itself implies a denial of the existence of the mystery. The ultimate annihilation of Pentheus is realized through the instrument of the Maenads and Agave, because both the god himself and these women oscillate on the margins of political life, vacillating between a pure, serene vision and the violent release of the instinctive emotional energies that the city restrains in the name of law and order.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Συρόπουλος (2000) 12.

⁴⁹ Συρόπουλος (2000) 15.

⁵⁰ Segal (1978) 185 – 202.

Conclusions - Similarities and Differences

Religion occupied a central place in the life of the ancient Greeks. Through these three plays, it is better understood how respect toward the gods governs—and sometimes defines—the lives and fate of mortals. In *Iphigenia in Aulis*, it is the need to respect the goddess, in the form of a dilemma, that compels Agamemnon to obey the divine commands. Human ambition and greed for territorial expansion become the levers for the near killing of his daughter. This obedience is reverently accepted by the victim herself, motivated by love for her family and the realization of a Panhellenic vision. So, while her fate may be the result of the imposition of a divine will, as in *Hippolytus* and in *Bacchae*, the purpose differs. In Iphigenia's soul lies the primordial voice of the Greek woman, whom the gods have blessed through her lineage. What, then, is her sacrifice for the common good in the face of posterity and eternal memory? She will not perish because she “sinned” at the expense of some god, unlike Hippolytus and Pentheus. Instead, she accepts her fate, and it is precisely this acceptance that at the last moment prevents her from dying. The gods intervene to remind mortals that, in addition to their material nature, people also possess a spiritual one. It was Agamemnon's hubris that angered Artemis, just as it was the irreverence of Pentheus that angered Dionysus, and the impiety of Hippolytus that angered Aphrodite, showing that all the gods independently demand the respect of mortals. As for the two victims in *Hippolytus* and in *Bacchae*, the punishment inflicted by Dionysus is just as harsh as the punishment inflicted by Aphrodite. In both cases, Euripides focuses the *eleos* of the spectators on the victims of the gods.⁵¹ Unlike Iphigenia, Pentheus and Hippolytus remain obstinate; by disregarding religion and persisting in their fallacy, they subject those around them to a sequence of divine retributions. Whether it manifests as a death wish, a curse born of unrequited love, or Bacchic worship, the gods' demands for deference remain steadfast.

⁵¹ Dodds (2004) 87.

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