

2017-03-31

Divine Deliverance A New Look at Euripidean Tragedy through Audience Interpretation

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Recommended Citation

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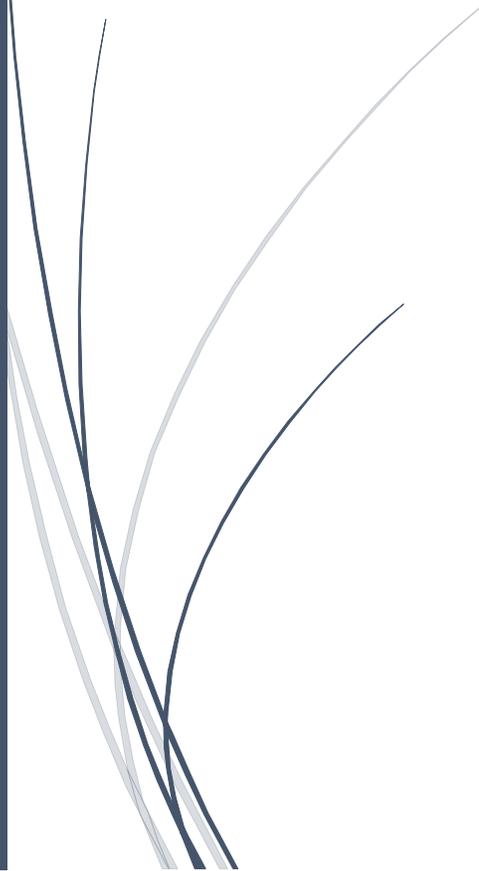
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3/31/2017

Divine Deliverance

A New Look at Euripidean Tragedy
through Audience Interpretation



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An Introduction to Interpretation

Tragedy is a well-known genre with a rich history in the Classical world. In the 5th century BCE, Athens had the incredible opportunity of knowing three extraordinary tragedians, and we are fortunate enough to still read their works today. Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides have all written works that enchanted the audiences of their time, as well as me. Euripides, however, caught my attention the most with his depiction of the gods and goddess who dominated ancient Greek culture. He brought them to life through his works, and they are truly captivating characters. Since they occupy a more prominent position in Euripidean works, one cannot help but wonder if these characters maintain greater significance than they do when depicted by other tragedians. In order to unlock their secrets, a divine-centric angle of analysis is necessary.

All forms of art can be examined through a historical lens. This allows the current audience to understand the influences surrounding the intended audience, and this frequently adjusts the understanding of the work. Universal themes may still exist, but the significance that these themes hold is weighted in relationship to the original context. This understanding has led me to consider the works of Euripides, and specifically the divine characters within them, in their historical context, the 5th century, a period dominated by the Peloponnesian War from 431-404 BCE. While there are many historical lenses through which one could analyze these works, I will be utilizing a political historical lens, in order to study the tragedies in relation to the war.

Euripides was born in 484 BCE in rural Attica.¹ His parents lived a comfortable lifestyle, and they had the means to educate their son when they moved to Athens during the Persian

¹ Lefkowitz 1981:94.

attacks to the countryside. Euripides was an intellectual young man, and although he is frequently aligned with the Sophists by both ancients and scholars, he would not completely conform to any school of thought.² Euripides was a teenager during the 470s, and throughout these years, he developed into a freethinking revolutionary during an exciting time for the arts in Athens. His freethinking ideas also challenged the Athenian decision to enter into the Peloponnesian War. Although Euripides was not a man of politics, he found a voice within the political realm through his tragic works. Euripides' works are often viewed as his participation in political life, as he argues against the fighting of the time.³ This was his way of interacting with the political world, since he did not serve as a soldier or statesman. Instead, he preferred solitude and contemplation.⁴

Euripides entered his first set of works to the Great Dionysia in 455 BCE, but he had little success in the dramatic competition judged by the audience members. His first victory did not come until 441, and he won only a total of five times, twice posthumously.⁵ Historians know that he was granted at least 22 choruses, and out of these tetralogies there remains 18 extant works.⁶ Among those are *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *Troades*, *Helen*, *Orestes*, *Iphigenia in Aulis* and the *Bacchae*, all of which were performed during the Peloponnesian War.⁷ He wrote many influential pieces during a time that Athens was suffering the hardships of war, and he spoke out against the fighting through his works. Many of Euripides's works feature prominent divine intervention, which is not seen in his contemporaries and adds to the influential power of his works. The gods and goddesses are often portrayed as characters with a physical presence on

² Lesky 1996:360

³ Decharme 1906:125.

⁴ Decharme 1906:119.

⁵ Lesky 1996:362.

⁶ Leskey 1996:362.

⁷ Leskey 1996:363.

stage, rather than as ideas or concepts, which distinguishes Euripidean works especially from those of his contemporaries, Aeschylus and Sophocles. These contemporaries merely mention the gods or have their mortal characters exhibit prayer or ritual; the gods themselves are not seen on stage. Finally, Euripides died abroad in 406 BCE, but his name and works lived on long after that.

This study consists of a literary analysis of two Euripidean plays to explore audience reception. *Hippolytus* is the first tragic work I will examine, and it was performed in 428 BCE, three years after the start of the war; the final work I will examine, the *Bacchae*, which was also Euripides' final play, was performed in 405 BCE, one year before the end of the war. A literary, specifically semiotic, analysis of the divine characters can provide insight into the audience's reception of the plays. That is, by examining the symbols within the text, one can begin to understand what interpretations the audience members may have conceived as a result of the characters and events both within the plays and against the historical backdrop of the Peloponnesian War. Therefore, I intend to argue that although Euripides was known for having an anti-war stance during the Peloponnesian War, a semiotic analysis paired with the historical context of the texts reveals a pro-war sentiment that stands as a well-supported interpretation likely held by some audience members.

I want to preface the rest of this paper with this—I am not arguing authorial intent at any point throughout my research, but rather that audience reception and interpretation is independent of authorial intent. In a discussion of authorial intent, I would align myself with the majority of scholarship and say that Euripides intended to send an anti-war message through his works. However, I am more interested in what the texts demonstrate and point the audience towards apart from preconceived notions surrounding the author. In this manner, my argument

goes against scholarly consensus regarding the reading of Euripides' works, because they operate through the narrowed lens of anti-war sentiment. I argue that the examination of viewer interpretation is very important because authorial intent does not reflect the impact of work if the audience receives a different message than the one intended based on the relationships they build with the signs around them. Judith Baxter discusses this understanding of post-modern linguistics; she says, "individual signs (whether in speech, writing or other forms of text) do not have intrinsic meaning but acquire meanings through their relationship with, and difference from, other signs."⁸ Baxter is claiming that signs must be studied in relationship to one another, which does include the context of the work, in order to understand their meaning. Euripides could instill meaning into the text, but his meaning is not the only one with validity. This is especially pertinent for works created during wartime, because they can be converted into propaganda, whether they were designed that way or not.⁹

In order to support the parallels I draw between the divine characters and the key figures and states of the Peloponnesian War, I intend to use a semiotic analysis to better understand the plays. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, typically recognized as the first semiotician, semiotics is defined as "the science of the life of signs in society."¹⁰ This is a very broad definition, and many semioticians since Saussure have narrowed the understanding down into more refined areas of study. However, the overall concept remains the same: it is the study of symbols. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress, authors of *Social Semiotics*, explain Saussure's definition with more depth. They state, "In its terms, everything in a culture can be seen as a form of communication, organized in ways akin to verbal language, to be understood in terms of

⁸ Baxter 2003:24.

⁹ Chou 2011:131-2.

¹⁰ Hodge and Kress 1988:1.

a common set of fundamental rules or principles.”¹¹ Hodge and Kress continue to explain that semiotics offers the opportunity to study signs in a systematic, organized fashion. This is how I utilize semiotic analysis in my research.

I will use two semiotic approaches throughout my research paper: spatial and metaphorical. Using these different semiotic approaches, I intend to study the divine characters, both their actions and their words, as symbolic representations of different aspects of the Peloponnesian War. For example, I will look at the physical distance between characters, both human and divine, as they exist in different locations or are confined to specific areas on stage as representations of power and control, which are key components of any war. This semiotic analysis will be the driving support of the link between the plays and war that will ultimately bring the reader to the interpretation that these two tragedies may exhibit pro-war sentiment.

Spatial semiotics is the study of spatial relationships between characters, objects, scenes, and time within a work. A variety of concepts and ideas may be presented through this technique, such as power dynamics, emotions, and social events. Hodge and Kress also explain this type of semiotics by displaying very basic examples of spatial representations in everyday language. They state, “In English as in other languages, there are many forms of speech which express social meanings in spatial terms: ‘keeping one’s distance’, ‘being stand-offish’, ‘high status,’ ‘grovelling’, ‘knowing your place’, ‘upper management’, and so on.”¹² Hodge and Kress explain that these are often classified as metaphors, but they are truly demonstrating a certain dynamic through a spatial representation. Spatial semiotics can also occur through physical representations as well. Hodge and Kress discuss Edward Hall, who “coined the term

¹¹ Hodge and Kress 1988:1.

¹² Hodge and Kress 1988:52.

‘proxemic’ to refer to the set of meanings carried by physical relationships in space, specifically by closeness and distance. This is undoubtedly an important transparent signifier of social meanings, especially those concerned with solidarity relations.”¹³ Indeed, a great amount of social meaning develops out of proxemic studies, along with spatial semiotics as a whole. With regards to the divine characters in Euripides, because of the spatial representations mentioned in the text, as well as in the stage directions, proxemic studies help to determine the relationships between the characters. These relationships ultimately build into the interpretations that align with the historical events.

Metaphorical semiotics is another key component to this paper, and this type of study opens a whole new guide to meaning. Glenn Allan Roosevelt defines a metaphor as “a figure of speech in which one quality comes to be known in terms of another quality.”¹⁴ He furthers this explanation by stating that metaphors are rooted in connotation rather than denotation, and they can convey a whole range of human emotions. While these may seem like the basics one discussed in grade school, there is another level to metaphors that goes well beyond the universal understandings. Steven Pinker discusses “the Metaphor Metaphor” in his book *The Stuff of Thought*. Pinker boils words down to their most basic meaning, and then he demonstrates how they collectively combine to demonstrate a larger metaphor. He believes individual words serve as metaphors, rather than needing full clauses or sentences to construct them. Pinker uses an example from the Declaration of Independence, where he points out a series of words that form the larger metaphor, *alliances are bonds*. He highlights the words *bands*, *dissolved*, *connected*, and *separation* to display four separate metaphors that feed into the overall metaphor. The

¹³ Hodge and Kress 1988:52

¹⁴ Roosevelt 1979:329.

colonies and England were not physically constrained by bands, nor was there anything that must physically dissolve to separate them. This is how he breaks down individual words and expresses them as metaphors. When these smaller metaphors come together, they demonstrate a larger metaphor, which depicts two allied territories as physically connected in order to represent a sense of oppression through bondage.¹⁵ This deeper understanding of metaphoric language helps one find the root of meaning, and this helps connect characters of the tragic works to events and characters of the Peloponnesian War.

Having discussed the two semiotic approaches I will use throughout the paper, I will now illustrate my method. First, I will open each chapter with a brief summary of the Euripidean tragedy that will serve as the focus of that chapter. The primary plays I will study are *Hippolytus* and the *Bacchae*. I have selected these particular plays on account of the strong presence of their divine characters and the multi-year separation between each performance, allowing me to analyze each during a different segment of the war. After the summary, I will conduct my spatial and metaphorical semiotic analysis on the portions of the tragedy that involve the divine characters. Then, I will delve into the political context at the time. I will discuss the major contemporary events of the war, as well as any key figures from the period. Finally, I will bring the historical context in direct conversation with the semiotic analysis, drawing parallels between the two and supporting my interpretation that positive war sentiment is exhibited by the representations of the divine characters.

This investigation produces important insight into the potential audience members of Euripidean plays, who were at the Great Dionysia during a particularly difficult time. People

¹⁵ Pinker 2007:235.

frequently use art to support their understandings of major world events, regardless of whether the work was intended to be allegorical, and there is no reason to assume that this did not happen in 5th century Athens as well. Today we see movies such as *Avatar* being used in support of stopping the Dakota Access Pipeline, despite the fact that the movie debuted approximately seven years ago. While there may not be definitive evidence that gives insight into the ways in which audiences interpreted tragedies, it is important to consider that Euripidean plays may have been interpreted in a number of ways, and they may have had a similar effect on the Athenian population as *Avatar* did for America. The interpretations presented in this paper add to the conversation regarding war sentiment among the entire population, not just those noteworthy enough to be mentioned in the history books. Euripides' sentiment is known to scholars today, but an alternative interpretation to the tragedies may provide insight into ways in which the average audience members understood the plays, and ultimately, projected their feelings about the war onto them. To demonstrate the intrinsic connection between Athenian audience, state business, and tragedy, a brief overview of the City Dionysia and its role in Athens is in order.

Chapter 1

The Sacred-State Connection:

The Great Dionysia, Euripides, and Treatment of the Gods

The city of Athens held The Great Dionysia every year as a festival for the public and a tribute to the god Dionysus. During this time, playwrights would present their work to the city and the judges in an attempt to win this prestigious competition. The Dionysia was a source of ritual and entertainment, but the playwrights used this platform to promote their deeper opinions on political agendas as well. This chapter introduces the ways in which The Dionysia was a complex festival, which promoted the gods, societal constructs, and political views through the works of the playwrights. Then, the focus shifts to Euripides, whose political views did not align with the actions taken by the Athenian government during the Peloponnesian War. Because of this, his works were frequently understood as anti-war sentiment by scholars. Although the intention behind his writings may have been anti-war, this paper demonstrates that the anti-war message may not have been received by all audiences. Finally, this chapter concludes with an examination of divine characters throughout the genre of tragedy. This highlights the expectations of the Greek audience in regards to certain gods and goddesses, and this understanding benefits the analysis that comes in the next two chapters. Euripidean portrayal of the gods as character on stage is different than his contemporaries, who did not characterize the divine as members of the play. Therefore, this unique portrayal likely drew attention from the audience members, and thus it becomes a great place for exploration. This chapter is comprised of a great deal of foundational work, but this overview contributes to the construction of the entire paper.

Theater was deeply rooted in Athenian society throughout the 5th century BCE. A vast majority of the playwrights were members of the Athenian public, and many of the audience members would participate in a play at some point in their lives, whether it be through acting, writing, or funding a production.¹⁶ It was a community theater, composed of men from all parts of Attica, and they all came together to share in this great tradition. Two major festivals were held during this time period, which started around the 6th century BCE and lasted through the 4th: the Lenaea and the Great Dionysia.¹⁷ Both were festivals in honor of the god Dionysus, but the latter festival attracted a much larger crowd, growing from an audience of just free, Athenian males to a wide range of foreign travelers.¹⁸ It was held at the beginning of sailing season, the ancient Greek month of Elaphebolion, or the modern time of March-April, and thus it was easier for travelers to attend.¹⁹ This Panhellenic festival was a great opportunity for the city of Athens to display its city identity, religious devotion, and artistic ability in one location.

The organization of play development followed a similar format to the Athenian government, and through this process, religion and state were interwoven. Once a playwright created a piece, he sent his proposal to the senior city magistrate, the *archon eponymos*.²⁰ The *archon eponymos* was usually charged with secular affairs, but his role in selecting plays for the Dionysia demonstrated the connectedness between this religious based festival and the Athenian government. The festival also tied into political life through the sponsors of the plays, who were called *choregoi*.²¹ The *choregoi* were elite men of the city who were selected to fund one of the playwrights' tetralogies, which were the standard assembly of submission, including three

¹⁶ Hall 2010:14.

¹⁷ Hanink 2014:320.

¹⁸ Sommerstein 1997:66-7.

¹⁹ Hanink 2014:320; Hall 2010:20.

²⁰ Hall 2010:21.

²¹ Hall 2010:21.

tragedies and a satyr play. Many men shied away from this position because it was a very monetarily costly endeavor. However, others saw it as an opportunity to boost their reputations and improve their political standings. The attention to political power rather than religious affairs demonstrates the deeply rooted secular feelings within this godly event. Edith Hall describes this situation best as she says, “tragedy sat on a cusp between the sacred and the secular, and it is this that allowed it to crystallize, by transmuting into memorable mythical storylines, the anxieties, aspirations, tensions, and contradictions that underlay Athenian society and thought.”²² These ties between the secular and religious aspects of the Dionysia, both formal and informal, set the foundation for the plays themselves to explore and critique these two spheres as Hall describes.

The playwrights had many opportunities to work political messages into their plays, and they took advantage of this from the very beginning of the creative process, incorporating nuanced themes and particular character castings to get at issues deep within the Athenian society. According to Aristotle, experienced tragedians always began writing with focus on the plot rather than the characters.²³ Because the playwrights selected familiar mythological characters and plots, their nuanced versions of these stories deliver a specific and significant message to the audiences. For example, Hera is known as a very jealous goddess. If a playwright centered a plot on her as a character, the story would likely tell the tale of Zeus cheating (again) and Hera’s wrathful response to the incident. Instead, the playwrights would create a plot, and then they would insert Hera into the story. The audience would bring their knowledge and expectations of Hera to the performance and work to understand how she fits into

²² Hall 2010:21.

²³ Hall 2010:28.

the scene or how she impacts the message presented to them. The nuances cause a shift in understanding, because it means the audience should be more interested in what message is being demonstrated and how the characters are contributing to the overall understanding, instead of accepting the plot as a result of the characters.

The plots were also developed in such a way that they often explored past, present, and future political agendas within one day in the play, and the ability to speak from all time periods while still in the present moment gave tragedians the ability to critique the current state. Tragedians developed characters to carry out their thoughts, opinions, and fears of the future. These characters included seers, gods, and other mythical creatures. Playwrights also explored the past through mortal characters with memories of long ago.²⁴ They could reflect on the past and predict the future, which would demonstrate their opinions on the actions occurring in the present. These depictions would likely resonate with the audience members who were also anxious about the current political scene, thus giving the plays a great amount of weight and influence on political power through messages carried to prominent audience members and the collective group thought.

There are many strategies used by tragedians to incorporate political sentiment, such as the chorus and the messenger. In his article on the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy, Albert Weiner claims that the chorus takes on a theatrical role rather than a dramatic role.²⁵ In doing so, the chorus is capable of pulling away from the tragic events of the play and separate the audience's emotional response from the tragic events as well. This distance presents the opportunity for the audience to reflect upon and question the actions before them.²⁶ The chorus

²⁴ Hall 2010:29.

²⁵ Weiner 1980:210.

²⁶ Weiner 1980:211.

consists of either a group of members from the city where the action takes place, or a group of individuals who are related to the events of the plot. Each of these groups carries a different perspective. For example, a chorus consisting of citizens would be invested in the actions that take place within their home town.²⁷ Their comments reflect opinions that are in favor of any action that benefits the city, rather than just benefit the protagonist. The foreign chorus, however, possesses an interesting dynamic. According to Pierre Vidal-Naquet, there is not a single extant play that does not depict a significant relationship between a Greek and a barbarian or a citizen and an alien.²⁸ This dichotomy allows the audience to see two separate perspectives on a situation. Therefore, if the home state within the play is going through a tragic event, the foreign chorus demonstrates the positive alternative to this tragedy. This highlights the negative aspect of the location of the play. The tension between the chorus and their surroundings gives the playwright the opportunity to highlight the bad that occurs within this society, whether it is political or religious.²⁹ Through each type of chorus, the playwright is able to demonstrate his opinions regarding the best type of political action.

The messenger plays another important role within the play. He comes on stage to announce the (often violent) action occurring off stage, which is frequently a key moment in the plot. The messenger gives a *rhexis*, a long, vivid, eloquent speech that is rarely interrupted by the other characters on stage.³⁰ This speech gives the playwright a chance to direct the audience's attention to the climactic moments of the play. Because the audience is being told what happened rather than watching what happened, the tragedian has the ability to craft the speech in such a way that it carries a specific message to the audience. A visual representation

²⁷ Hall 2010:30.

²⁸ Vidal-Naquet 1997:112.

²⁹ Hall 2010:30.

³⁰ Hall 2010:34.

of a violent crime may lead the sympathy of the audience to the wrong character. However, an auditory rendition of the event gives the tragedian more control of the audience's emotions, because he can recount the event however he needs. These particular characters gave the tragedian power over the deliverance of their stories, and they subtly shaped the entire emphasis of tragic works.

All of these elements of a tragedy, from the development of the plot to the messenger *rhesis*, came together to carry a political message to not only the Athenians, but their foreign guests as well. The tragedians spent the whole year preparing for the opportunity to share their works with the Hellenic world. Euripides was no exception to this. He was likely born in 484 BCE in rural Attica, although legend says that he was born in 480 on the day of the Battle of Salamis.³¹ It is said that his father received an omen that his son would be a great victor, and Euripides kept true to his predicted path.³² However, the gymnastic lessons his father arranged were not necessary on his road to victory.³³ The boy was destined for a different kind of greatness, as he forged a new path within Athenian society.

When Euripides was only four years old, his family had to move to Athens in order to protect themselves from the Persian attacks during the 2nd Persian War, and Euripides spent much of his adult life in the city.³⁴ The Greek city-states united as the Hellenic league in order to fight off their Persian enemies.³⁵ Once the war was completed and the Greeks were victorious, Athens was left with a feeling of strength, power, and freedom.³⁶ Their sense of might

³¹ Lefkowitz 1981:94.

³² Lefkowitz 1981:93.

³³ Lesky 1996:362.

³⁴ Murray 1965:16.

³⁵ Larsen 1940:177.

³⁶ Murray 1965:17.

impressed some members of the league, and this led to the formation of the Delian League.³⁷ Sparta, however, was less impressed, and they decided to separate from the league and exist without Athenian support. The separation from Sparta only seemed to increase the Athenian ego. Murray states, “This is the light in which Athens conceived herself; the ideal up to which, amid much confused, hot-headed and self-deceiving patriotism, she strove to live. She was to be the Savior of Hellas.”³⁸ The Athenians were ready to take on the world, which was later demonstrated with their imperial expansion, and few countrymen disagreed. However, Euripides was never known for his ability to conform.

Euripides was taught by sophists, philosophers and rhetoricians who taught for a living, and this began to shape his relationship with the world; but, he did not let these thoughts limit his personal views. Lesky says, “Euripides was neither simply a pupil of the sophists nor a propagandist of their ideas. He was open to their influence, their problems were largely his, but he always preserved the independence of his thought, while he frequently was outspokenly critical.”³⁹ Euripides valued the sophist teachings, but he was a free thinking individual. He was outspoken about his opinions, and he often contemplated the world through his own processes. Legends say he often sat in a cave in Salamis, where he either wrote his tragic works or just wondered about the ways of the world.⁴⁰ Athens was a great place for a mind like his during the 5th century, because the battle with the Persians led many philosophical men to the city for refuge.⁴¹ Athens became a hotspot for intellectual life. Euripides is well known as a bold

³⁷ Larsen 1940:180-5.

³⁸ Murray 1965:19.

³⁹ Lesky 1996:360.

⁴⁰ Lesky 1996:361.

⁴¹ Murray 1965:20.

thinker, and he was able to become a great contributor to the revolution of thought within Athens alongside the vast numbers of wise men.

There are many qualities that separated Euripides from his contemporaries, Aeschylus and Sophocles, but the strongest difference was Euripides's lack of political involvement. Aeschylus fought at the Battle of Marathon, and Sophocles served in the army and held many high offices, but Euripides did not attach himself to the polis.⁴² He preferred to spend his time in solitude, and he even had a personal library that provided him the opportunity to stay home and study.⁴³ Euripides was a man of contemplation, not action. He did not actively involve himself in political affairs, and he did not attempt to rise through the ranks of men in the polis. Euripides was not in favor of the power the masses possessed, nor the leadership they followed, and thus, he wanted no part of it.⁴⁴ However, he did pour his opinions into his works. His dramas were full of political views that were often controversial and unapologetic, which included his anti-war sentiment and his dislike of Alcibiades.⁴⁵ As an intelligent man, Euripides was not excited by war, and Decharme says, "Euripides is impressed less by the glories of war than by its cruelties, which excite his pity."⁴⁶ His anti-war sentiment is demonstrated in many tragedies that focus on the harsh realities of war, including the *Trojan Women*, which depicts a brutal scene of widowed women being taken into slavery by the Greeks. The conservatives of the time ridiculed him for his thoughts, which is seen within multiple comedic works, such as Aristophanes' *Frogs*.⁴⁷ Likewise, the Athenian citizens were not very fond of him, as demonstrated by the

⁴² Lesky 1996:361.

⁴³ Decharme 1906:119.

⁴⁴ Decharme 1906:124.

⁴⁵ Decharme 1906:125.

⁴⁶ Decharme 1906:128.

⁴⁷ Lefkowitz 1981:89.

mere five Great Dionysia wins out of approximately 22 entries.⁴⁸ While he was not well received among the judges, he was still famous throughout Greece, and his fame continued long after his death in 406 BCE.

A key aspect of Euripidean tragedies, and one that separates Euripides from other tragedians, is his use of divine characters. Euripides used divine characters as members of the cast, while Sophocles and Aeschylus merely used divine characters as thoughts, ideas, and concepts that the characters on stage mentioned. Euripidean gods and goddesses are often given the prologue of the work, setting up the plot which they initiate and direct. They maintain a physical presence on stage, and they frequently interact with the other characters of the play, both human and divine. This unique portrayal is attention grabbing, thus making it a logical area of study when gathering evidence for audience interpretation. In order to properly understand their role in Euripidean works, it is essential to have an understanding of the divine role in both civic life and tragic narrative.

The Greek gods and goddesses were complex beings in the ancient world, and the attitudes the Greeks held towards these deities are difficult to construct. In “Gods Cruel and Kind: Tragic and Civil Theology,” Robert Parker conducted a deep analysis of the gods and goddesses in civil context and tragic context. The civil context does not allow for the questioning of the gods; they are respected, honored, and blameless.⁴⁹ Parker states that it is possible that many 5th century Greeks did not believe in the gods and goddesses at all, but it would not be acceptable to publicize those opinions.⁵⁰ Whether or not one believed in the gods, they were called upon in times of trouble, celebrated in times of success, and understood to be

⁴⁸ Lesky 1996:361-2.

⁴⁹ Parker 1997:156.

⁵⁰ Parker 1997:156.

the true caretakers of the city. In tragedy however, characters are frequently seen questioning, belittling, and even threatening the gods and goddesses, which is not a relationship one would frequently witness in the real Greek society.⁵¹ The divine characters are often vengeful in retaliation, causing hostile relations with many mortals. The gods and goddesses are often acting within civic theology, but the harsh antagonism that is painted in tragedy was not discussed with such bluntness in civic theology.⁵² The civic gods do not possess the level of petty and cruelty they possess in tragedy, and the modern, non-scholarly view of them has been skewed in line with the tragic tradition. However, civic gods were less feared and more revered than their tragic counterparts.

Parker recognizes the differences in each sphere, and he admits that tragedy takes on a bold, less realistic depiction of traditional divine figures, but he ultimately believes that tragedy echoes the traditional religious understandings.⁵³ This traditional tie adds weight and support to the tragic stories, and it gives the playwrights the ability to take a new concept and link it to an ancient, respected background. However, in order for this link to carry the proper message, the playwrights would have to take into consideration the public's understanding of the gods and goddesses in both an artistic and religious setting. Parker discusses the constraints of the artists who utilize divine characters by saying, "a poet exercising absolute freedom to represent the gods just as he pleased would be simply incomprehensible."⁵⁴ A playwright cannot simply use Athena to demonstrate his own theory of justice unless Athena is accepted as representing a divine sense of justice in both the artistic and religious understandings. If she is known for being a just goddess in the religious sphere, but she is frequently depicted as a vengeful character in

⁵¹ Parker 1997:159.

⁵² Parker 1997:151.

⁵³ Parker 1997:147.

⁵⁴ Parker 1997:145.

artistic works, the audience would expect the latter characterization and the message would be lost in translation. Understanding the audience's expectations based on popular civic and tragic religious comprehension is crucial to the understanding of their interpretation, which is a key element to this paper. Therefore, I will now discuss the common depictions and understandings of divine figures throughout the tragic genre in order to lay a foundation for the interpretations in the next two chapters.

Tragic works follow the ancient epics of Homer in the illustration of the divide between human and divine. These stories come from the 8th century BCE, and the gods and goddesses depicted by Homer serve as guidelines for the writers who come later. In his chapter in *Mythologies of the World*, Michael Jameson discusses the divine figures of the *Iliad* as a base understanding of the gods in literature. He gives a detailed explanation of the separation between the mortal and divine realms. Jameson begins his chapter by saying, "the gods are seen in a fictional world of their own as well which is in a sense the explanation of their intervention on the human plane...that world is a storyteller's fancy, a deathless, painless reflection of the world of men, whereas their intervention is a fact of human experience common to the poet and his audience."⁵⁵ This statement introduces two important aspects of the divine world: the gods live in a fictional, deathless, painless world, and they intervene within the human world.

The fictional world of the gods is demonstrated throughout many hymns, epics, and eventually tragedies as well. Jameson gives the example of Aphrodite and Diomedes in the *Iliad*.⁵⁶ Aphrodite descends to the battlefield when her son Aeneas is injured, and while she tends to his wound, Diomedes cuts the goddess with his spear. However, Aphrodite's injury

⁵⁵ Jameson 1961:247.

⁵⁶ Jameson 1961:248.

means very little to the divine figures. Zeus heals her wound, and Apollo goes back to the battle field to save Aeneas. There was never any real danger for the goddess, and she is able to escape the battlefield and heal in little time. The divine characters do not suffer as the mortals do. Jameson proves this point further in the tale of Aphrodite and Ares.⁵⁷ The legend says that Hephaestus set a trap for his wife and brother, and once the two went to bed together, they were caught in his trap. Hephaestus called upon all the gods to see this affair, but the gods found the entire situation quite amusing. In the mortal world, affairs were treated quite differently. The affair of Paris and Helen started the Trojan War, and the affair of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus led to murder of Agamemnon.⁵⁸ The gods and goddesses exist in a world without lasting consequence, unlike their human counterparts.

Divine intervention is a difficult matter that incorporates this idea of a separate plane of the gods, but this issue is much more complex, because the gods have a specific set of codes that does not apply to the human realm. The gods have their own rules concerning when they may or may not intervene within the human sphere. One main concept rests in the idea that a god cannot interfere with another god's revenge. Zeus and Hera are a famous example of this. Anytime Zeus cheated on Hera and she took her revenge on the unlucky woman involved, Zeus could not overthrow her revenge. He can find loopholes, but he cannot prevent Hera from carrying out her revenge. Jameson also discusses the intervention of the divine figures in the *Iliad* as explanations for human interactions.⁵⁹ For example, Athena comes down to stop Achilles from striking Agamemnon, and she is only visible to Achilles. Therefore, everyone else at the battle just believes that Achilles thought better of his decision, when that is not truly the case- he was

⁵⁷ Jameson 1961:249.

⁵⁸ Jameson 1961:249.

⁵⁹ Jameson 1961:247.

persuaded otherwise by a goddess. The gods have many other similar instances throughout the epic work. Then, there are the circumstances in which the gods and goddess do more than make suggestions. As previously mentioned, Apollo removes Aeneas from the battle field, and there is a scene in which Athena retrieves the spear of Achilles when he misses Hector.⁶⁰ The gods are physical, active presences in these moments, and their actions affect the lives of the mortals involved. However, the rules among the gods add a complex layer to the understanding of divine intervention. There are certain circumstances in which the gods may not interfere with the course of human events, as stated before in the Hera and Zeus example. Another exists with fate. This is demonstrated through Thetis, who knows her son Achilles will die in battle, yet she does not interfere among the fighting to save him. Zeus is also fated to watch his son Sarpedon die in battle, and he knows that the other gods would not allow him to prevent this occurrence.⁶¹ The gods certainly do not play by human rules, but they do have their own code to follow, and these laws greatly impact the course of mankind in all forms of literature.

Tragic works build upon the guidelines demonstrated above to give the audience a deeper understanding of the divine figures, and this helps form the audience interpretation of the gods. Homeric epics are known to credit the gods for the actions of mortals, such as when Achilles gives the excuse that it was Zeus's will for many Achaeans to die.⁶² However, the tragic genre is known to credit the gods with much more. Euripides and Aeschylus reference the gifts given to man from the gods in at least one work, such as *Prometheus Bound*. The tragedies state that the gods are responsible for man's ability to work, farm the land, sail ships, perform skilled labor, and reason.⁶³ This creates the foundation of benevolence from the gods, and because of this,

⁶⁰ Jameson 1961:247.

⁶¹ Jameson 1961:249.

⁶² Jameson 1961:251.

⁶³ Mikalson 1991:47.

mortals are indebted to their generous superiors. However, along with this image of benevolent gods is a certain level of fear of the gods, especially in the instance of *Prometheus Bound*. Zeus intended to annihilate all of humanity, but Prometheus thwarted his plan. This story reminds the humans that the gods are all powerful, and so they must be honored and respected; and when they are honored and respected, they do generous deeds. However, the idea that the gods are credited with creating all of the tools for human survival was not necessarily a common belief within the Athenian society. Sophocles writes about these same gifts, but he credits their development to the human race.⁶⁴ Whether or not the common people agreed with this belief is not easily deciphered, which is true of civic religion as a whole, but they did continue to participate in religious ceremonies, which indicates they may have supported the views of Aeschylus and Euripides more.

Despite the beliefs of Sophocles and an unknown number of other Athenians, many rituals were practiced with frequency in order to appease the gods and ensure their benevolence, and these rituals are often depicted in tragedy as well. In times of battle, the Athenians poured libations and said prayers. Before individual battles, they sacrificed animals in order to receive omens.⁶⁵ These offerings and dedications to the gods demonstrate a belief in the power of the divine figures, and these habits are found in many tragic works. The ancient Greeks referred to their godly allies as *σύμμαχος*, and this term is frequently found in tragedy.⁶⁶ It is primarily used in reference to battle allies, but it is occasionally found metaphorically to refer to a bond between a god and a mortal without a war setting as well. One particular instance occurs in the *Bacchae*, where Dionysus tells the Thebans that he would have been a *σύμμαχος* had they not treated him

⁶⁴ Mikalson 1991:48.

⁶⁵ Mikalson 1991:49.

⁶⁶ Mikalson 1991:51.

so poorly.⁶⁷ Mikalson states that some may negatively argue that the classical Athenians did not believe they needed σύμμαχος in their everyday lives, making this everyday ally depiction less relevant.⁶⁸ However, they did honor their gods when war time arrived, in an attempt to win their favor, and ultimately, win the war.

The Athenians also believed that good favor with the gods would award them a good harvest season. In order stay in good standing, the mortals would offer sacrifices, hold festivals, and pray for crops.⁶⁹ Bountiful amounts of food were historically believed to be a sign that the gods were shining down on the people, but as is previously stated by Parker, the tragic depictions exaggerate this understanding. They often demonstrate the negative side of the gods, who would kill crops and spread diseases as a punishment for impiety. This is seen in many works, including *Eumenides*, where the Erinyes bring poison to the Earth that destroys plant and human life in retaliation for Orestes' lack of conviction (*Aes. Eum.* 782-3). Thebes also suffers a plague for their plants and animals because Oedipus is an unpurified killer (*Soph. Oed.* 100-101).⁷⁰ There is no strong evidence to conclude that the historical Athenians believed such ailments were due to curses, but these punishments were accepted within the tragic genre. This demonstrates that the gods were seen as supreme beings in both the tragic and civil worlds. The divine beings had control over harvest and sickness, which can be equated to power of life and death.

While the gods are praised for bringing many blessings to the human race, morality is not cited as one of them. As previously stated, Euripides and Aeschylus attribute many human developments to the gods, but morality and legal matters are not mentioned.⁷¹ The gods do

⁶⁷ Mikalson 1991:52.

⁶⁸ Mikalson 1991:52.

⁶⁹ Mikalson 1991:54.

⁷⁰ Mikalson 1991:54.

⁷¹ Mikalson 1991:48.

create certain structures, such as hierarchy and gender roles, but they do not demonstrate morality or pass down laws, which tragic characters often ask for. Mikalson states that Medea wishes men were stamped like coins so that one could tell the good from the bad, and Andromache wishes there was a cure for evil that worked similarly to a cure for snake venom. These statements are made in a tragic world that exists upon much less structure than that of the historical environment, but there is no evidence that the historical world did believe that the gods arranged the legal world either.⁷² The fact that the gods did not instill a sense of morality builds on the previous idea that they exist in a separate, painless world. They have their own set of rules and laws, and their system cannot apply to the mortal world, because they do not suffer as mortals do. The gods may contribute to the human existence, but they cannot completely construct a mortal world in their own image.

The understanding of gods and goddesses within the historical world as well as the tragic world is pertinent to understanding the expectations of the audience members. Their preconceived notions about particular figures would shape the entire performance, and thus, potentially alter any messages presented by the tragedian. Although the tragedians and audience members share the same cultural context, the artists usually have a particular vision in mind, and this can cloud their vision of their own work. Thus, their limited angle prevents them from seeing possible audience interpretations. It is also useful to understand the intertwined reality of religious and political affairs throughout the Dionysia. The audience is expecting a hint of politics, rather than a purely religious festival, because there was no separation of religion and

⁷² Mikalson 1991:48.

state in 5th century BCE Athens; a religious event was simultaneously a political event. Therefore, those expectations frame the performances set before them.

Euripides was a bright man who grew up around these festivals, so he took advantage of the same opportunities as his contemporaries; he worked to insert his own political messages into the art, despite his otherwise passive position within the polis. He demonstrated the cruelties and evils of war upon the stage, in the hopes that his fellow citizens would feel the same pang of pity he did. However, the understanding of the divine characters as illustrated in this chapter leads to the conclusion that they are figures of set roles and traits that can be included in a play to add powerful presences and shaping of human affairs. History has shown that messages can be received in a different manner than which they are delivered. For example, Nicias spoke out against the Sicilian Expedition in front of the Athenian assembly in 415 BCE, but instead of deterring the expedition, his words inspired the people to pursue it (Thuc. 6.9-24). Now that Euripides' background and the audience expectations have been presented, it is time to explore the beginning of the Peloponnesian War and Euripides's *Hippolytus*. The next chapter discusses the Mytilenean Revolt of 428 BCE and makes a comparison between Athens, Sparta, and Mytilene and the characters Aphrodite, Artemis, and Hippolytus.

Chapter 2

The Justification of Aphrodite in Hippolytus and Athens in the Peloponnesian War

Euripides staged *Hippolytus* around 428 BCE at the Great Dionysia in Athens, about three years after the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. The Delian League led by Athens was fighting against the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta. These two super powers fought one another for the next 24 years, and throughout this time, Euripides raised his voice through his plays. He did not actively engage in political life, but he did let his ideas be known through his works. Undoubtedly, the events of the ongoing Peloponnesian War were not far from the audience's mind while they gathered for the annual festival. However, in this paper, I argue that Euripides' anti-war beliefs did not reach his audience in the way he may have intended.

In *Hippolytus*, there is a striking similarity between the major goddesses, Aphrodite and Artemis, and the major poleis, Athens and Sparta. To demonstrate this point, I provide a summary of the play and then present a spatial and metaphorical semiotic analysis of *Hippolytus*, discussing the divine characters and their interactions with the mortals. In 428, Athens was largely preoccupied with the Mytilene Revolt, in which Mytilene attempted to leave the Delian League. To prevent additional states from following and as retribution for the dishonor, Athens acted quickly to stop the revolt and punish Mytilene for the violation of their Delian League oath and duty. Aphrodite, who has been rejected and dishonored by Hippolytus, seeks violent retribution. Through a spatial and metaphorical semiotic analysis of *Hippolytus*, I will demonstrate that Aphrodite is portrayed as a powerful figure through descriptions of her vast rule across a large physical area, similar to the growing Athenian empire. Her powers of love are metaphorically weaponized, and she is described as a formidable opponent. Artemis also

strengthens the comparison between the goddess and the war rivals when viewed through a semiotic lens, because she is shown to be separated from Hippolytus and she does not intervene in his conflict with Aphrodite, just as Sparta does not intervene on behalf of Mytilene. Then, I give the context of the war efforts from the Athenian side, discussing the rebellion of Mytilene, along with the majority of the island of Lesbos. Finally, I will bring these two sections together in the argument that the goddesses in *Hippolytus* would have been interpreted as a reflection of the battle raging on between Athens and Sparta, specifically over the Mytilenian revolt. This understanding would have encouraged support of the Athenian war effort during its original context, because it justifies the actions Athens takes against Mytilene, rather than villainize them for their harsh treatment of the weaker city state.

A Hippolytus Summary

The title character Hippolytus was a suppliant and companion of the goddess Artemis, as well as the son of Theseus and the Amazon Hippolyta. Hippolytus served the goddess Artemis by leading the life of a virginal hunter, and he was fully devoted to their celibate lifestyle. He worshipped Artemis so intensely that he disregarded the other gods, especially Aphrodite. Hippolytus refused to sacrifice to her, and he condemned the actions of this goddess of love and lust. Aphrodite was not pleased by the slanders and lack of gifts from this mortal, so she concocted a plan of revenge (Eur. *Hipp.* 5-58).

Aphrodite used her powers to sway the heart of Phaedra, the wife of Theseus, so that she fell in love with Hippolytus. Phaedra was miserable over her predicament, knowing how vile her feelings were. She confided in the nurse, who wanted to help the poor woman recover from her unknown ailment, but the nurse betrayed her confidence and told Hippolytus in an ill attempt to

help her mistress. Hippolytus was repulsed by the news, but he promised to keep the secret nonetheless (Eur. *Hipp.* 570-668).

Phaedra, who was still suffering over her unfortunate circumstances, resorted to suicide to end the agony. However, she left a note for Theseus that claimed Hippolytus raped her, which led to her desire for death rather than a life full of shame. The grief-stricken husband was so wrought with anger that he called for the death of his son by invoking one of the three curses granted to him by his father, Poseidon. Hippolytus begged for his father's understanding, and he continued to make the argument that as a servant of Artemis, women did not interest him. However, Hippolytus refused to divulge Phaedra's secret, even though it would save his life. Theseus closed himself off to the arguments of his son, and he exiled Hippolytus from the land, which eventually led to the young man's death (Eur. *Hipp.* 905-1101).

Once Hippolytus was gone, Artemis appeared to Theseus and explained the work of Aphrodite. Theseus was remorseful, but it was too late. Hippolytus returned fatally injured after his horses dragged him along the road on his way out of the country. Hippolytus received one final moment with Artemis, and then he forgave his father for the fate he dealt him. The play ends with Hippolytus's death under the care of his grieving father (Eur. *Hipp.* 1162-1461).

Semiotic Understanding

My semiotic analysis of this tragic work breaks down the actions and speech of the divine characters and analyzes the symbolism within them. This particular analysis will demonstrate that each goddess acts in accordance with expectations of divine figures in the religious and tragic spheres. Therefore, the seemingly cruel acts of Aphrodite and the passive presence of Artemis are both justified. This semiotic analysis also serves to define the relationships between

the characters, with specific focus on the divine, in order to later draw the comparison between the tragic narrative and the historical context in which it was originally performed.

The prologue of *Hippolytus* introduces the plot of the play through a soliloquy presented by the goddess Aphrodite. In this speech, she explains her hatred of Hippolytus, the only man who slanders her and refuses to sacrifice to her because of his rejection of her divine realm of love and sex (Eur. Hipp. 9-22). Aphrodite's contention does not rest in his abstinence, but rather in the fact that he openly speaks against her ways in favor of Artemis. Euripides allows her plan to unfold right away, and he utilizes space to communicate her message.

Aphrodite communicates that she is a powerful goddess by discussing the vastness of her domain, and this is the first instance of spatial semiotics. In the first couple of lines she says, ὅσοι τε Πόντου τερμόνων τ' Ἀτλαντικῶν / ναίουσιν εἴσω, φῶς ὀρῶντες ἡλίου, / τοὺς μὲν σέβοντας τὰμὰ πρεσβεύω κράτη, / σφάλλω δ' ὅσοι φρονοῦσιν εἰς ἡμᾶς μέγα (Eur. *Hipp.* 3-6). “Many men dwell between both the boundaries of the Euxine Sea and the Pillars of Atlas, seeing the light of the sun. I rank as first the ones worshiping my strength, but I overthrow many that are minded against my greatness.”⁷³ These lines guide the reader through the domain of Aphrodite, which ultimately constitutes the entire living world. First she describes specific landmarks: the Euxine Sea, which is the modern day Black Sea, and the Pillars of Atlas, which refers to the Strait of Gibraltar that separates the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.⁷⁴ This would have encompassed most of the known world for the Greeks in the 5th century, ranging from modern-day Spain to Turkey. Right at the start of the prologue, Aphrodite is claiming rule over everything. However, the imagery goes a step further by the statement that she also rules over everyone who lives under the sun. Her domain has now stretched out into the uncharted

⁷³ All translations by author.

⁷⁴ Shaw 2007:2.

territory that has yet to be explored. She has power over every man and woman, regardless of location, ethnicity, or religion.

Euripides describes Aphrodite as a powerful being with a realm that extends over the entire world population, and this depiction of vast power magnifies her issues with one single man. Out of all the people in the world, Hippolytus is the one person who has scorned her so deeply through his lack of sacrifice and slander that she devises a plan to destroy him. This focalizes his transgressions against the goddess, and it builds support for her decision to act out against him. However, even more support develops from the historical religious aspect of the situation. Similarly to her tragic portrayal, Aphrodite is in fact a very powerful goddess. She does indeed have a very large domain. And with this position comes supplication and sacrifice from the people. As stated within the previous chapter, the Greeks believed in frequent offerings to the gods to ensure good health, harvest, and success in battle.⁷⁵ They would not exclude any god or goddess intentionally, especially if that deity was considered one of the more powerful figures. Parker states, “tragic characters pray, make sacrifice, bring offerings, and dedicate spoils very much (so far as we can judge) in accord with fifth-century formulas and protocols.”⁷⁶ Assuming Parker’s statement to be true, Hippolytus is one of few men in both the tragic and the historical world who, by withholding Aphrodite’s offerings, does not fulfill his requirements in relationship with the gods. Hippolytus’s downfall is his ὑβρις. The servant warns him the first time he takes the stage that he must not be too haughty to honor all the gods, but Hippolytus does not heed the warning (Eur. *Hipp.* 86-104). Therefore, the wrath of Aphrodite is justified. Hippolytus failed the duties of a suppliant, so she must punish him for his actions.

⁷⁵ Mikalson 1991:47-60.

⁷⁶ Parker 1997:146.

The initial soliloquy is the only time Aphrodite is present throughout the play, but Artemis appears twice⁷⁷ and interacts with mortal characters later in the play to create a divine presence and add to the spatial semiotics of the story. One of the important spatial attributes involved with the scenes of Artemis is height. Artemis is described as above the mortal characters at many times throughout the play. The first example occurs when Hippolytus is left alone after Theseus determines his fate. Hippolytus stands below the statue of Artemis, saying his final goodbyes to his patron goddess (Eur. *Hipp.* 1092-94). This position grants power and authority to Artemis, while Hippolytus stands below her, helpless and alone. As Hippolytus occupies the space below Artemis, he is offering himself up as a suppliant to the goddess. He turns to her in this time of desperation, yet he does not use language that indicates a request for help. He merely bids his goddess farewell and proclaims himself the chastest suppliant she will ever have (Eur. *Hipp.* 1098-1101).

Artemis herself appears on stage after Hippolytus talks to her statue, and once again, she appears above the other characters. Artemis comes to tell Theseus of the wicked crimes he just committed, and she appears to him on the roof (Eur. *Hipp.* 1283).⁷⁸ From this position, she explains to Theseus that Hippolytus scorned Aphrodite, and the insulted goddess took her revenge by setting all of these pieces in motion. Artemis was not allowed to intervene until after Hippolytus's fate was set in stone, because the gods and goddess follow their own guidelines that inhibit them from disrupting the will of another god or goddess.⁷⁹ But now she is able to communicate the situation to Theseus (Eur. *Hipp.* 1283-1340). In this scene, the spatial dichotomy represents a separation of knowledge. Artemis both literally and figuratively talks

⁷⁷ Her first appearance is as a statue, while her second appearance is as the goddess.

⁷⁸Lawall 1986:72. In this commentary, Artemis is describe upon the top of the palace. However, other commentaries suggest she arrives on clouds (Murray 1902:86.) In both scenarios, she is above the mortals on the ground.

⁷⁹ Jameson 1961:249.

down to Theseus, the unknowing, deceived character. She possessed a higher knowledge, and thus, she is found above him in the scene. Despite his lack of knowledge, Artemis still condemns him for the death of Hippolytus, but she herself does not have to take any of the blame, since divine law demonstrates that she was not allowed to change the fate of Hippolytus.

The idea that Artemis is more knowledgeable, yet still blameless in the situation, leads to the another understanding of the spatial dynamic displayed on the roof: guilt and innocence. Artemis is above guilt and blame, because she exists in the godly sphere. As it is stated in the previous chapter, the gods and goddess exist in a blameless, guiltless world. They live separate from human morals and sufferings.⁸⁰ Therefore, her higher position represents this separate world by putting her physically closer to the heavens, a representation of truth and blamelessness. Theseus, however, is below her. He is guilty of this crime because he is a man, planted on the earth and firmly inserted into the human society. When Artemis first appears to Theseus, she is chanting πῶς οὐχ ὑπὸ γῆς τάρταρα κρύπτεις / δέμας αἰσχυνθείς, / ἢ πτηνὸς ἄνω μεταβάς βίον / πῆματος ἔξω πόδα τοῦδ' ἀνέχεις; (Eur. *Hipp.* 1290-1293) “How do you not hide in the netherworld beneath the earth, having disfigured your body, or having changed your life to a bird above, lift up your foot out of this misery?” Within this imagery, Artemis is reinforcing the spatial dynamic. The bird flying through the sky is identified with innocence, while the path upon the earth leads to destruction and guilt. Theseus is stuck in that place of destruction and guilt, despite Artemis’s implication that he may choose another path. As a man, he must accept consequences and pain as Artemis keeps herself separate from those troubles from her comfortable view on the roof.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Jameson 1961:247.

⁸¹ Jameson 1961:249.

The final spatial dynamic developed when Hippolytus returned to his father's house to die, which ultimately conveys the inequality of gods and humans. He has already been dragged and beaten by his horses, he is not capable of holding his own body upright, and he is on the brink of death. While talking to Theseus, Hippolytus notices the presence of Artemis. He rejoices in her presence, despite the pain and suffering of his current situation. However, once Hippolytus is near death, Artemis exits the play. She turns to him and says, καὶ χαῖρ': ἐμοὶ γὰρ οὐ θέμις φθιτοὺς ὄρᾶν / οὐδ' ὄμμα χραίνειν θανασίμοισιν ἐκπνοαῖς: / ὄρῶ δέ σ' ἤδη τοῦδε πλησίον κακοῦ (Eur. *Hipp.* 1437-1439). "And farewell; for it is not for me to see the dead before me, nor for my eyes to be touched by the fatal exhalation. And I see that you are already near the bad thing." Artemis is looking down upon this broken man, and rather than stay to fix the problem, or at very least stay to support him to the end, she leaves him so that she does not have to witness the death herself. This reminds the viewers of her status, because the gods would not taint themselves with the miasma that occurs through death.⁸² Hippolytus is her closest human companion, but the divide between the mortals and gods is so large that she is not at all expected to stay by his side and risk exposing herself to the filth of death. This divide is visually represented through his broken body on the ground, while her divine presence is still on the roof. At the end of the day, he is just a human, and she will live on forever in her immortal form. They are not equals in any way, and the spatial representation demonstrates that fully.

The spatial lens shows divine-human distance, while a metaphorical lens reveals the strength of Aphrodite and the weakness of Hippolytus. Hippolytus depicted himself in an inferior light while discussing the falsity of Phaedra's accusation. In his attempt to persuade Theseus that he did not rape Phaedra, Hippolytus says, οὐκ οἶδα πρᾶξιν τήνδε πλὴν λόγῳ κλύων

⁸² Parker 1983:33.

/ γραφῆ τε λεύσσων: οὐδὲ ταῦτα γὰρ σκοπεῖν / πρόθυμός εἰμι, παρθένον ψυχὴν ἔχων (Eur. *Hipp.* 1004-1006). “I do not know this deed except hearing by word and seeing by painting; for I am not willing to behold such things, bearing a virgin soul.” In this line, the word choice παρθένον is very important. The word in this circumstance is used to denote a virgin. However, it is often translated as maiden or girl.⁸³ This synonym existed in antiquity, because young girls were expected to remain virgins until they were married. They did not possess any sexual autonomy, even after marriage occurred.⁸⁴ Hippolytus simultaneously likens himself to a virgin and a female, which not only builds the argument of his innocence through chastity, but also lessens him as a threat by taking on a feminine role, which was considered inferior to masculinity.⁸⁵

While Hippolytus takes on a feminine role, the goddesses are put in opposition to one another through the use of similar weapons and battle-related diction. The metaphorical representation of love as a sharp pain pushes this division between the goddesses into a war-filled atmosphere. In her opening soliloquy, Aphrodite discusses the sickness she has put on Phaedra; Aphrodite says:

καὶ τήνδε σὺν δάμαρτι ναυστολεῖ χθόνα,
ἐνιαυσίαν ἔκδημον αἰνέσας φυγῆν,
ἐνταῦθα δὴ στένουσα κάκπεπληγμένη
κέντροις ἔρωτος ἢ τάλαιν' ἀπόλλυται
σιγῆ, ξύνοιδε δ' οὔτις οἰκετῶν νόσον (Eur. *Hipp.* 36-40).

And he went by ship with his wife to this land
Promised a yearlong flight abroad.
And here she groaning having been struck
By sharp points of love and she suffered death in silence,
Nobody of the home knew the sickness.

⁸³ LSJ reference

⁸⁴ Foxhall 2013:41.

⁸⁵ Foxhall 2013:70.

The phrase *κάκπεπληγμένη κέντροις*, having been struck by sharp points, is the way Aphrodite describes the love she embedded inside Phaedra. Aphrodite has successfully weaponized the power of love, making her a formidable opponent. This same language is used elsewhere in the play as well, solidifying this use of Aphrodite's power. When Artemis is explaining the source of this suffering to Hippolytus, she says, *τῆς γὰρ ἐχθίστης θεῶν / ἡμῖν ὅσοισι παρθένειος ἡδονῆ / δηχθεῖσα κέντροις παιδὸς ἠράσθη σέθεν* (Eur. *Hipp.* 1301-1303). "For by the most hateful goddess of us who delight in virginity, she was stung by sharp points and fell in love with your son." Again we see the word *κέντροις*, indicating that Artemis too sees this love as a painful weapon being yielded by Aphrodite. That particular word is also relevant with regard to Artemis. Aphrodite's love has been weaponized and metaphorically demonstrated to be a sharp point. Artemis is known as a hunter who utilizes the bow and arrow. By giving the two goddesses comparable weapons, they have been put into the same game with the same rules. At this point, it is a fair battle that allows for the strongest goddess to prevail. This opposition has occurred throughout the play, even though it does not appear as a main point of tension. The goddesses exist on either side of the mortal Hippolytus. For Artemis, Hippolytus is the most faithful servant. For Aphrodite, he is the source of her rage and the target of her revenge. The goddess themselves do not go head to head in this play, but they are clearly on opposite sides of the same individual. Even without Hippolytus, the stage setting in the opening scene reveals the tension. Stage directions say there should be a statue of each goddess, and the ancient audience would have immediately recognized the opposition of the goddess of sex and the goddess of virginity in the same location.⁸⁶ The similarities drawn between their weapons, whether that be the sharp pain of love or the sharp pain of an arrow, further pits them against one another. They

⁸⁶ Shaw 2007:2.

are both powerful, female goddesses who promote completely opposite lifestyle, but are capable of inflicting the same type of pain. They serve as the perfect rivals.

This section has demonstrated the relationships between the goddesses and their individual relationships with Hippolytus through semiotic processes. The goddesses are on an equal plane, which is one above the existence of humans. They follow their own set of codes, which we see as Artemis does not interfere with the actions of Aphrodite, despite these actions hurting her devoted suppliant. The goddesses are also formidable opponents, each sporting their own sharp weapons. The spatial representations show Aphrodite as a powerful being worthy of supplication, which discredits Hippolytus's decision to scorn her and withhold offerings. Spatial representation also separates Artemis from the human characters by portraying her on the roof, which reveals that she is not only above them physically, but morally, intellectually, and emotionally as well. All of these relationships taken in the context of Athens three years into the Peloponnesian War reveals strong ties between these three main characters and the power players during the Mytilenian Revolt, Athens, Sparta, and Mytilene. The next section will outline the events of during this particular time of the war in order to draw the parallels needed to support a pro-war interpretation.

Historical Background

Athens and Sparta engaged in the Peloponnesian War in 431 BCE, and the war lasted until 404. Surrounding city-states and territories were allied to either side, whether it be with Athens, the democratic, artful, and expanding city to the north that headed the Delian League, or Sparta, the strong, oligarchic, and militarized city to the south that led the Peloponnesian League. These two powers fought hard over the course of the war, frequently trading victories and

turning the tides on one another. However, this section is devoted to the beginning of the war up through the Mytilene Revolt in 428 BCE. We see the strength and loss of the general Pericles, the suffering of the Athenian people, and the conflict over their Delian league member, Mytilene. This historical information then ties into the semiotic analysis of *Hippolytus* in order to reveal the similarities between the tragic characters and the city-states in battle during 428.

During the first three years of the war, Athens was commanded by the great general and statesman, Pericles. Thucydides refers to him as the “first citizen of Athens” (Thuc. 2.65), because he was an influential ruler for approximately 30 years. Despite the fact that Pericles led Athens through many wars and conflicts, he was not perceived as a warrior in spirit. In the beginning of his biography, Plutarch describes him as “admirably tempered and suited for the harmony and safety of the people” (Plut. *Per.* 184).⁸⁷ He goes on to discuss Pericles’s desire to join the side of the populace rather than the aristocracy from which he came, and from this position, he strategically conducted himself in such a way that he built up great influence without becoming an overbearing figure. Plutarch said:

Pericles, however, to avoid any feeling of commonness, or any satiety on the part of the people, presented himself at intervals only, not speaking to every business, nor at all times coming into the assembly, but, as Critolaus says, reserving himself...for great occasions, while matters of lesser importance were dispatched by friends or other speakers under his direction (Plut. *Per.* 187).

Pericles succeeded in this style for many years to come, being challenged, but never overthrown by other men during 15 years of his generalship.⁸⁸ These challenges were frequently unsuccessful, since Pericles had the support of the people behind him.

However, this all changed right before the start of the Peloponnesian War. According to Plutarch, Pericles and his friends were attacked with multiple accusations in the years leading up

⁸⁷ All Plutarch translations by John Dryden.

⁸⁸ Sealey 1996:301.

to the start of the war (Plut. *Per.* 194-195). Pericles specifically was charged with misuse of state funds, and he feared for the future of his political position (Plut. *Per.* 32.1). This event was the start of a dangerous theory regarding Pericles. Plutarch explains that some Athenians blamed the Peloponnesian War solely on Pericles, because they believed he encouraged the trade embargo on Megara, which ultimately led to Spartan intervention, in order to divert attention from his own legal trouble (Plut. *Per.* 32.3). Whether or not this version of the initiating cause of the war is true, Plutarch does not say. However, if it is true, Pericles positioned himself quite well. Not only did he divert negative attention away from himself, he also diverted positive attention to him. By creating a war, he also created a strong reason the Athenian people needed him (Plut. *Per.* 33.1).

Despite this compelling account, many scholars side with an account from Thucydides that states other reasons for the war. Athens was rapidly expanding during this time, and it posed a threat to Sparta and other members of the Peloponnesian League. In order to put a stop to the Athenian expansion, the Spartans responded with a war. Many historians believe that this was a war in the making, rather than a quick response to recent events during the 430s.⁸⁹

Regardless of which account above is true, the beginning of the Peloponnesian War created an uncommon hostility between Pericles and the people. The Spartans were ravaging the countryside of Attica, and Pericles decided to move all of the citizens within the walls of the city (Thuc. 2.55). Refusing to meet the Spartan army on land, as the numbers were not in the Athenian's favor, Pericles responded with a series of naval attacks down the coast of Peloponnesus (Plut. *Per.* 33.4). The displaced Athenians were forced to live within the city walls while their farms were being destroyed, and they were not satisfied with naval attacks

⁸⁹ Sealey 1996:314. For more information on the split between Athens and Sparta, reference Thucydides book 1.99-118.

while the Spartans were destroying their homes. The negative sentiment about allowing farms and homes to be destroyed was then paired with the ill feelings that arose from the plague that swept through the city.⁹⁰ According to Thucydides, “The whole city was very aroused, and they felt rage against Pericles and recalled none of the advice he had given previously but abused him because he was a general yet did not lead them out, and they found him responsible for everything they were suffering” (Thuc. 2.22).⁹¹ The Athenians were suffering, their leadership was failing them, and everyone began to feel desperate.

In 430 BCE Pericles was removed from political power, fined a debated amount of either 15 or 50 talents, and stripped of his military command (Plut. *Per.* 35.4). He had a considerably harder life after that point, as many of his family members died from the plague (Plut. *Per.* 36.4-5). However, not long after Pericles hit rock bottom, the Athenians came back around to him. His absence was noteworthy within the political sphere, and being in need of his leadership, the Athenians elected Pericles general once again (Thuc. 2.65). He served Athens until he died in 429 BCE. He died from the same plague that took his family and many other citizens of Athens (Thuc. 2.65).

Despite the negative reputation and lack of popular support Pericles received during the last five years of his life, Pericles’ image lived on in a positive light, and the Athenians struggled without him. According to Thucydides, the Athenian government did not heed any of Pericles’ advice in regard to winning the war, and because of this, they destroyed themselves. Thucydides says:

For he said keeping quiet, looking after the fleet, not extending the empire, and not endangering the city they would prevail; yet they managed all these affairs in the opposite way, and in accordance with personal ambition and personal gain they pursued other policies that seemed unrelated to the war, to the detriment of both themselves and the

⁹⁰ Sealey 1996:123.

⁹¹ All Thucydides translations by Steven Lattimore

allies, since, when these succeeded, they brought honor and benefit more to individuals but, when they failed, they did damage to the city regarding the war (Thuc. 2.65).

The new leaders were incompetent in comparison to Pericles, which is not surprising since the Athenian people removed him from power and then persuaded him to return for them. Plutarch ends his biography by stating that some men did not appreciate Pericles while he was in power because he eclipsed everyone else, but once he was gone, they fully understood the magnitude of his contributions to Athens (Plut. *Per.* 39.4-5).

The Athenians may have found themselves at a loss without Pericles, but they were still in the midst of a war, and thus they had to move forward in their efforts. According to Thucydides, the administration of Athens suffered a great deal, because many men were trying to fill the role of Pericles. However, rather than create a strong, intellectual presence, as did their predecessor, they instead worked to appease the people (Thuc. 2.65). This changed the war effort, because Pericles was the voice of strategy and reason in a city-state full of emotionally charged citizens. Without his presence, and with rulers who wanted to appease the people, fighting and expansion ensued

The years 429-428 consisted of battles over allied territories. The Spartans either attacked or tried to recruit Athenian allies, such as Zakynthos and Thrace, and the Athenians retaliated in response (Thuc. 2.66). During this time, in the spring 428 BCE, the city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos solidified plans to rebel from the Delian League. This movement was organized by their oligarchic leaders, and the amount of support it received from the demos is disputed.⁹² However, Thucydides states that this plan had been in the making before the war

⁹² Gillis 1971:42. Within this article, Gillis discusses the possibility of the Mytilene demos supporting the Athenian empire. When the revolt officially ensued, the oligarchic government distributed weapons to the people. Once the people had possession of these weapons, they refused to fight the Athenians. Gillis explains that some classicists believe this act was a bloodless coup, where the people overthrew their oligarchic government in favor of Athens

even began; the Mytilenians were just waiting on the support of the Spartans (Thuc. 3.2). They moved ahead with fortification of their city, development of their fleet, importation of grain, and acquisition of all other necessary goods for a battle (Thuc. 3.2).

Athens was warned and encouraged to take action by members of the Mytilenian society who for one reason or another did not support the revolt (Thuc. 3.2). This information was crucial for Athens to receive, because this territory was not just a city that fell under control of Sparta. This was a city which actively decided to leave, and more specifically to fight their way out of, the Delian League. Athens was left with the decision to allow this city to join the Peloponnesian League, which could inspire other cities to do the same, or it could fight the rebellion, which would prevent Sparta from gaining another ally and demonstrate to the rest of Greece that the Athenians would not tolerate traitors.

The Athenians were weakened by the plague and the start of the war, but they feared the consequences of a revolt. They sent a fleet of 40 ships in order to preemptively strike at the Mytilenians and hopefully end the conflict immediately (Thuc. 3.3). Informants told the Athenians that the Mytilenians would be found outside the walls of the city in order to participate in a religious festival (Thuc. 3.3). The Athenians planned to attack during this festival or threaten war on Mytilene if the citizens stayed behind the walls. When they arrived, a warning had already made its way to the Mytilenians, and they stayed behind the walls (Thuc. 3.3). They attempted to fight the Athenians, but once the small, Mytilenian fleet was quickly chased down by the strong, Athenian fleet, the generals began negotiations (Thuc. 3.4).

However, this was not the end of the conflict. The Mytilenians sent a representative to Athens in order to argue that their city was not in revolt. At the same time, they sent a

and their democracy. However, other arguments state that the Mytilene population was concerned with food distribution, and their surrender to Athens was a desperate gamble risking their lives in order to secure food.

representative to Sparta requesting assistance, assuming their audience with the Athenians would fail (Thuc. 3.4). The messengers sent to Athens did in fact fail, and war commenced in the summer of 428 BCE (Thuc. 3.5).⁹³ The Athenians easily secured allies in this battle, but the Mytilenians' requests for aid from the Spartans went unanswered. They decided to deliver a speech to the Spartans that was told in Thucydides' account of the events, in which they ask for their new allies to fully embrace them and not view the Mytilenians as traitors (Thuc. 3.9). They justify their separation from the Delian League by stating their disgust with the treatment of their subjects and the enslavement of their allies (Thuc. 3.10-11). The political ideals did not align, and therefore, the Mytilenians wanted to join the Peloponnesian league. The Spartans were persuaded by this speech, and when they officially decided to accept the Mytilenians as their allies, they agreed to send help.⁹⁴

Unfortunately for the Mytilenians, the promises made by the Peloponnesians did not arrive in time. By the winter of 428 BCE, the Athenians had successfully cut off the city of Mytilene by both land and sea (Thuc. 3.18). The Spartans were engaged in other aspects of the war, and they allowed their allies to finish the harvest season before heading off to help, so the ships sent in support of the Mytilenians appeared to be in no great hurry (Thuc. 3.27). While waiting for these provisions, the Mytilenians ran out of food, and they were forced to arm their common people. When the populace gained control of these weapons, they turned on their government and surrendered to the Athenians, thus ending the revolt (Thuc. 3.27).⁹⁵

⁹³ The war is now between the Athenians and the entire island of Lesbos, not just the city of Mytilene. The only exception is the Methymnians (Thuc. 3.5).

⁹⁴ Sealey 1996:328-9.

⁹⁵ The story of Mytilene continues with the famous court case. Upon surrender, the Mytilenians requested an ambassador travel to Athens before any action be taken against the members of the revolt (Thuc. 3.28). The Athenian leaders agreed to this, but the decision in Athens came back quite negatively; the men were to be slaughtered and the women and children sold into slavery (Thuc. 3.36). However, the ruling was overturned a day later (Thuc. 3.36-49). The men most responsible for the revolt were killed, but a majority of the population was spared (Thuc. 3.50).

This revolt was a pivotal moment in the Peloponnesian War, because Athens was forced to respond to an issue of allegiance and obligation, rather than focus on the real threat before them. Mytilene may have been a small city-state, but their actions were not tolerable to the Athenians. The Mytilenians disregarded their agreement and refused to pay the tax and supply soldiers to their superior, protecting patron. This revolt is compared with the actions of Hippolytus in the following section, which brings together the historical context and the tragedy itself.

Hippolytus during the Mytilene Revolt

In order to understand one of the possible interpretations of *Hippolytus* during the time of the Mytilene rebellion, I propose a cast of characters in order to make my comparisons: Mytilene takes on the title role of Hippolytus, Athens becomes the goddess Aphrodite, and Sparta assumes the role of Artemis. The key to this play is that while Hippolytus is stuck in the middle of the conflict, the two forces held at opposition are truly Artemis and Aphrodite, our divine characters. This is very similar to the Mytilene rebellion; Athens was fighting against Mytilene, but their ultimate foe was Sparta. Keeping this framework in mind, I will guide the rest of the discussion between this historical event and the play, utilizing the historical background and the semiotic analysis discussed previously in this chapter.

Pericles was the voice of reason for many years in Athens, encouraging the city to remain composed and take little action during the war rather than take bold strokes of vengeance when the Spartans attacked. Although he does not have a specific character for comparison, he does add to the overall interpretation. Pericles represents humanity. He is the calming figure that reminds Athens that there are consequences to actions in this mortal realm. Although they may

be wronged, retaliation may not be the best method. Aphrodite can seek revenge without consequence; Athens cannot guarantee the same for themselves. Unfortunately, the death of Pericles in 429 BCE left the city without a strong, single leader to calm their urge to fight. Similarly to Aphrodite, the Athenians were not willing to allow others to mistreat them or underestimate their power, and this type of disrespect called for extreme measures. This opportunity soon presented itself in the revolt happening at Mytilene.

The Mytilenians found themselves in between two powerhouse city-states. They were technically allied to Athens because of the creation of the Delian League brought on by the Persian Wars, but they were hoping to forfeit this arrangement.⁹⁶ As previously stated, they delivered a speech to the Peloponnesian League, in which they condemned the actions of Athens and explained the similarities in ideals between the Mytilenians and Spartans. This declaration was an open statement of betrayal to Athens. The Mytilenians not only refused to fulfill their obligation of providing soldiers to the Delian League, but they were also siding with the Athenian opponent.⁹⁷ Hippolytus finds himself in the same position; he openly chose Artemis and denied Aphrodite all forms of supplication, which were the grounds for her attack. Neither Athens nor Aphrodite would allow those beneath them to disregard their obligations, so they sought out the justice they deserved.

This understanding of the story and of the war is reinforced further by the spatial semiotics which put Artemis and Aphrodite above Hippolytus and the other characters. Furthermore, the spatial semiotic analysis of Artemis deeply enhances the interpretation that connects Artemis to Sparta and Mytilene to Hippolytus. As a statue in a temple, and then as the goddess on the roof, the mortal characters always look up to Artemis. They are dwarfed in her

⁹⁶ Strassler 1996:53.

⁹⁷ Strassler 1996:53.

presence, suggesting that she is at a higher place of power. The Mytilenians found themselves in a comparable situation with the Spartans. They did not embark on this rebellion until they were told they had Spartan support, and then throughout the revolt they depended on help from the Peloponnesian League in order to beat their Athenian foe. The spatial representation has also characterized Artemis as an innocent, all knowing character in this play. A previous section in this chapter suggests that Artemis inherently possesses these traits because she is a goddess, and therefore, she is above human systems of guilt and ignorance. The spatial representation reiterates this concept by placing her closer to the heavens, a divine realm.

Sparta occupies a similar position to that of Artemis, because their lack of interference in the battle does suggest a type of guiltlessness. They are above the problems of this inferior city-state. The Spartans also see more than the Mytilenians do; they are involved in other aspects of the Peloponnesian War as a whole, and they understand that this is just a piece in the larger chess game. The Mytilenians are focused on their own personal battle and the oppression of the Athenians, suggesting a lack of broader knowledge that is depicted in the play as well. The final scene for Artemis is also very telling, in that she looks down upon Hippolytus as he dies, and then she leaves right before his death. The Spartans watched the Mytilene revolt from a distance, taking their time to send aid to their new allies. However, when they finally reached the island and saw the losing battle in front of them, they left in haste to return to Sparta. They did not intervene or try to save their dying allies; they simple went home.

Additional aspects of the play call to mind the ongoing military engagement. As previously discussed in this chapter's semiotic analysis, there are many instances of battle imagery throughout the play. For example, Aphrodite's love is compared to κέντρος driving into the victim, Phaedra. This invokes thoughts of arrows, spears, and other weapons of war. That

sensation also happens to coincide with Artemis's weapon of choice, the bow and arrow. The two goddesses are pitted against one another with similar types of weapons, suggesting that they are engaged in a fair battle between equally matched sides. This play was presented during a major war between two superpowers; the city itself may be taking a break to celebrate the City Dionysia, but no one could forget that the war still raged on beyond the walls.

It is important to keep in mind the purpose of this specific interpretation; it sways the audience in favor of Aphrodite, which translates to support of the Athenian decision to attack Mytilene for revolting. Aphrodite is the goddess the Athenians would have connected with, and there are multiple reasons this would be the case. First, she delivers the prologue of the play. She is given the opportunity to state her case before any of her actions or any other characters can persuade the audience to feel another way. Aphrodite uses this opportunity to build herself up by first discussing the reign of power she possesses, which would have struck a chord with the expanding Athenian empire. The Athenians positively related to an extensive empire, since they were currently at war because Sparta wanted to halt their expansion.⁹⁸ Already, the people have a connection to this character, and the play is not more than 10 lines deep. Then, Aphrodite explains that she will not tolerate Hippolytus openly separating himself from her. The Athenians would have had very similar feelings about this particular issue, since the Mytilenians gave a public speech in Sparta that denounced Athens and the Delian League. Finally, Hippolytus is refusing to be a suppliant of Aphrodite, just as the Mytilenians are refusing to honor their obligations to Athens as Delian League members. The Athenian citizens would not approve of such behavior in Hippolytus, since they expected Mytilene to uphold their side of the bargain.

⁹⁸ Sealey 1976:304-313

Before the tragedy truly begins, Aphrodite has already drawn the sympathy of the Athenian people.

Hippolytus was performed at the City Dionysia in 428 BCE, which was held in the Attic month of Elaphebolion, or the modern time of March-April.⁹⁹ The initial declaration in Sparta that led to the start of the Revolt of Mytilene occurred in the summer of 428, with the final surrender in the following summer of 427.¹⁰⁰ While it is impossible to say if Euripides predicted this revolt and wrote a play in response, the information gathered here does suggest a particular understanding of that play that is altogether possible for the audience to have obtained, although it may have come back into conversation after the revolt officially began. Their connection with the goddess Aphrodite would put the blame on the city of Mytilene, and the Athenians would support the decision to attack this slanderous city who failed to meet their obligations to the Delian League and then openly chose to side with the opponent. The context in which this play was performed may very well have drastically altered the understanding of the play, and the understanding of the play may very well have altered the sentiments of the war in return. However, this reading is just one of two plays demonstrated in this paper that discusses Euripidean plays that communicate the same message. Now, we discuss the *Bacchae* and the events surrounding the end of the Peloponnesian War, which brings the tragedy into a historical context in which it also conveys a pro-war sentiment.

⁹⁹ Hanink 2014:320.

¹⁰⁰ Strassler 1996:166-171.

Chapter 3

A Man and a God:

A Comparison of the *Bacchae*'s Dionysus and Alcibiades

Euripides lived out his final years in the Macedonian kingdom, where he wrote one last masterpiece – the *Bacchae*. The *Bacchae* was performed posthumously by a relative of Euripides, and it won first prize at the Dionysia in 405 BCE. Euripides acquired a great deal of success and admiration after his death, as many artists do. Sophocles is even said to have dressed in mourning attire at the Dionysia rehearsal upon hearing of Euripides's death.¹⁰¹ However, his success at this event is still surprising. He left the city of Athens, he was not supportive of the current war efforts, and his tragedy was being staged by someone else, which was uncommon at the time. Yet, his play was victorious, his reputation grew, and his work is still well known today.

The notoriety of this particular play means it was likely enjoyed, discussed, and contemplated by many men. With the war nearing its conclusion, the play would likely be understood in the context of the current events. In this chapter, I will compare the character Dionysus to the historical Alcibiades. In the play, Dionysus is mistreated and not worshipped by his mother's homeland of Thebes, and in the historical context, Alcibiades was unappreciated and rejected as an Athenian leader. The lack of value for these superior individuals led to the destruction of each society. I begin with a summary of the *Bacchae*, followed by a semiotic analysis of the play. In this analysis, I use spatial semiotics to discuss the hidden, unrecognized nature of Dionysus's power, as well as his potential to be an ally for the Theban people. Next, I

¹⁰¹ Bates 1961:11.

discuss key aspects regarding Alcibiades, Athenian leadership, and the end of the Peloponnesian War. Alcibiades was removed from power, and after that the Athenians struggled to regain strong leadership. Finally, I conclude by looking at the analysis in light of the historical events to develop a plausible interpretation. Alcibiades, who served in the war in a distant land, was underappreciated in a similar manner to Dionysus, who does not display his power openly in Thebes throughout the tragedy. Each individual spent time away from his respective city, and in their absence, rumors develop about the each of them that ultimately led to more trouble for the cities than the harm the rumors inflicted upon Alcibiades and Dionysus themselves. Depending on the exact time of conversation, the play may serve as either a warning or an explanation of the downfall of Athens at the end of the war, and it is a great exploration into the Athenian mindset of the time.

The Basics of the Bacchae

Dionysus is the star of Euripides's final award winning tragedy, the *Bacchae*. The god opens the tale with a dramatic monologue that addresses the grievances he holds against the Thebans. His mother Semele was a Theban princess; she was one of the four daughters of Cadmus. Semele was impregnated by Zeus, but when a jealous Hera inspired doubt in the mind of Semele, she asked Zeus to reveal himself to her. Zeus's true form is a lightning bolt, and his power killed Semele and forced Dionysus' premature birth. Zeus took Dionysus away to protect him from Hera, and once grown, he gathered followers throughout Asia (Eur. *Bac.* 1-12).

Dionysus explains that he has now returned to his mother's home to address the allegations that occurred upon her death. Her father and sisters spread the false accusation,

which they themselves believed to be true, that she was not pregnant by Zeus, so no child of hers was worthy of any praise. This rumor was fueled by the fact that Semele was struck by a lightning bolt, which was thought to be Zeus's punishment for her lies. In order to right this wrong, Dionysus sheds his godly form for a human form. He intends to use his disguise to convince Pentheus, the heir to Cadmus's throne, that he is a true god worthy of the libations and other honors Pentheus has thus far refused him. However, Dionysus has already utilized his power to drive all of the women of Thebes into madness. These new maenads are roaming the mountainside and praising their divine leader, including the daughters of Cadmus, and eventually Cadmus himself as well. Dionysus proclaims that upon Pentheus's acceptance of him as a god, he will leave the city and introduce himself to other parts of the world. However, if Pentheus tries to remove the women from the mountain and continue to scorn the god, Dionysus will strike back with even greater intensity (Eur. *Bac.* 13-63). This concludes Dionysus's monologue, and the action of the play begins.

Pentheus's first moment on stage is an interaction with Cadmus and the local seer, Teiresias. The two older men are dressed in ceremonial skins and carrying thyrsoi, scepters adorned with pinecones on the top. The men try to persuade Penetheus that it is safer to worship Dionysus as a potentially false god than risk the wrath of disrespecting a true god, but the young king will not waver in his staunch opposition to Dionysus (Eur. *Bac.* 248-369). The older men retreat into the mountains, but Pentheus remains behind in court, where he soon comes face to face with Dionysus in his mortal disguise. Dionysus gives the king multiple opportunities to accept the god, but Pentheus refuses. He has Dionysus locked away in a dungeon while he goes to address with the women of his city infected with madness (Eur. *Bac.* 436-514).

Dionysus escapes his chamber and razes Pentheus' home, and while the young king is enraged to find his prisoner standing before him and not within a jail cell, he learns that worse things are happening. His mother Agave and her sisters are among the wild women in the mountains, hunting, fighting the men of the city, and dressed like the maenads. Dionysus gives Pentheus one last opportunity to accept the god, and when Pentheus refuses him once again, Dionysus encourages Pentheus to go up into the mountains himself to see exactly what the women are doing (Eur. *Bac.* 574-770). Dionysus leads Pentheus, who is starting to experience madness himself, to the site of women. Pentheus wants a better visual of their Bacchic rituals, so Dionysus helps him to the very top of a tree. Then, Dionysus alerts the women to Pentheus' presence, and they attack him, knocking him out of the tree and ripping his body apart (Eur. *Bac.* 1048-1136).

The story concludes with Agave carrying the Pentheus' head as trophy to her father in the city. As the madness fades from her, and she realizes what a horrendous act she has committed, Cadmus and Agave both recognize that this must be the work of Dionysus, who is indeed a god. Dionysus punishes them all further with exile, and then he exits the scene. The mortals admit their faults in denying the god his true honor and slandering Semel after her death, and then they say their final goodbyes as they depart on their new paths (Eur. *Bac.* 1139-1380).

Semiotic Understanding

The Bacchae is filled with a variety of spatial representations, and many of them feed into one main message – the power of Dionysus goes unrecognized, which is the root of his wrath within the play. This is demonstrated through multiple ways. One of the more obvious

representations occurs between the city and the mountains. The city is a place of order, laws, customs, and it is a male-dominated society. It follows the laws of civilized humanity, where citizens dress in particular clothes and use tools and weapons they forged. While the characters are inside the city, they do not partake in Bacchic rituals, and they do not recognize Dionysus as a powerful god. However, his madness drives the characters into the mountains, which is a physically separate place to represent a different set of rules and expectations. The women steal away in the night to dance and hunt in the wild, and Cadmus himself even ventures into the mountains, despite his old age and frail body. The characters also abandon their civilized lives by dressing in fawn skins, suckling animals rather than babies, and hunting with their hands. Maenads were often depicted wielding knives, so the barehanded hunting of Euripides' maenads creates greater separation from the city by removing manmade products from the narrative.¹⁰² To further the distinction with the city, the mountain society is female-dominated, as Cadmus and Teiresias are the only males mentioned to join the Bacchic rituals. This follows historical Greek customs, as Bacchic rituals were associated with women throughout the Hellenistic period.¹⁰³

This mountainous society is not the creation of mortals alone. Dionysus not only drives them to the mountain, he also gives them the ability to shed their civilized nature and worship him through the environment they have around them. Dionysus represents the wild, so participation in a natural environment through an animalistic manner is an appropriate way to worship the god.¹⁰⁴ All of these smaller details highlight the distinction of the city and the mountain, which serve as spatial representations of the society of Thebes and the world of

¹⁰² Joyce 2010:521-2.

¹⁰³ Joyce 2010:522.

¹⁰⁴ Puhvel 1987:137-8.

Bacchic ritual. From this position in the mountains, the power of Dionysus goes unrecognized by those in the confines of the city. They do not experience his power, and therefore, they do not believe it exists.

The spheres of power, which are created by the division of city and mountain, and the unrecognized sense of Dionysus' power can be understood from a legal standpoint as well. The city is governed by the royal family headed by a king, which is a title that Pentheus recently received. Their subjects live in the city, and in such a public place, the civilians are held accountable by the constant surveillance of government and neighbors. Because of this lifestyle, the Bacchae cannot thrive in the city, because many of their actions are not in accordance with the laws of manmade civilization. To make matters more difficult for their cult, Pentheus declared the worship of Dionysus illegal within the city of Thebes. However, the mountain is a lawless area. It exists outside the control of Pentheus, and thus, Dionysus may easily claim this territory. Pentheus merely speculates at the behavior of the women in the mountains, and without knowledge of their activities, he is incapable of governing their choices through punishments within the city.¹⁰⁵ Dionysus may utilize his power in an unobstructed, unsupervised manner in the mountains, but yet again, that means his power must go unrecognized as well.

The city and mountain contrast is further demonstrated by Agave's hunt. While she is in the mountain, Agave's madness drives her to believe her son is a lion. She hunts this noble prize in the service of Dionysus, and she takes the head as a trophy. Agave returns to the city bearing the head of her son, and only once she remains in the court of the palace for some time does the madness dissolve. She sees the head of her son with true clarity, and she does not remember any

¹⁰⁵ Joyce 2010:522. Bacchic ritual was considered a womanly role, because it was often associated with uncivilized nature of women as a whole. It was a secret society, and men could only guess at the true nature of these gatherings.

of the hunt. This shows the strong divide between the power of Dionysus and the city. Even a participant in the action did not recognize what happened. This mountainous territory is clearly defined as the realm of Dionysus, and his power remains hidden and unrecognized because it exists outside Theban territory. The only characters who see and retain the images from the mountains are the messengers, but messengers are often understood as characters outside the dramatic narrative; they are there to help the audience recognize the power of Dionysus, rather than help the characters in the play. The others characters of the play are either driven into madness themselves or hear the accounts second hand, making them easier to deny. Therefore, Dionysus goes unrecognized again.

There are some magical events that occur within the city, since the power of a god knows no boundaries, but these scenes are concealed as well, so that none of the city members have direct proof of the god's existence.¹⁰⁶ Dionysus is chained and sent into a dark chamber. Pentheus tells him that he may dance in worship there, since the Bacchae prefer the dark for their ritualistic setting. Instead of dancing in the dark, Dionysus pulls an even greater performance. He frees himself from his chains and destroys the castle of Pentheus. Despite all of this great magic done right in the heart of the city, nobody is there to witness it. The chorus is present, but they are alarmed and uncertain what is happening around them. The audience is also unable to see, because Dionysus is speaking from off stage until the powerful event is over.

Dionysus himself also remains unseen in his true form for a vast majority of the play. He comes to Thebes as a mortal, hiding his true identity from those around him. He takes on the role of a high member of the Bacchic cult, and he does not even reveal himself to the chorus of

¹⁰⁶ Jameson 1961:249.

Maenads. As Dionysus remains unseen, it furthers the notion of unrecognized power, which is the root of his problem. Despite the lack of recognition, Dionysus is able to prove his worth, ability, and rage throughout the tragedy. Once Cadmus and Agave publicly admit to the power of Dionysus, he reveals himself to them. However, their confession is too late, and he delivers the rest of their punishment.

A final spatial representation in this tragic work merits a place in this conversation, despite straying away from the theme of unrecognized power. This moment occurs when Pentheus ascends the mountain with Dionysus. Pentheus is partially driven by madness, but also partially intrigued by the actions taking place in this hidden location. However, when he reaches the site of the Bacchae, he is unable to see everything happening. In order to get a better view while still staying hidden, he decides to climb a tree. Posing as a friend, Dionysus uses his powers to help Pentheus onto the highest branches. Then, Dionysus reveals himself to the Bacchae and points out the invader up in the tree. At this moment, the women attack him with rocks and uproot the tree, bringing Pentheus hurling to the ground. Once he is down, they rip apart his body and scatter it across the mountainside.

This representation is very significant, because Dionysus is demonstrating that his power could have been used for the benefit of the Thebans. Pentheus wants to climb the tree to see the cult, but he can only climb so high alone. However, with the help of Dionysus, he is able to reach the top of the tree. In the final scenes of the play, Dionysus says, εἰ δὲ σωφρονεῖν / ἔγνωθ', ὄτ' οὐκ ἠθέλετε, τὸν Διὸς γόνον / εὐδαιμονεῖτ' ἂν σύμμαχον κεκτημένοι (Eur. *Bac.* 1341-3). “If you knew to be sound of mind at the time when you were not willing, you would be prosperous having procured the son of Zeus as an ally.” He admits that he would have been willing to use his divine power to aid the Thebans, and more specifically his family. This is especially

important, because this is one of the few moments mentioned by Jameson where σύμμαχον is used in a non-military context.¹⁰⁷ Dionysus would have become a Theban ally in everyday life, and to have a powerful god supporting the city in peace as well as war is a benefit to any city. Instead, they refused to accept him as a god. Rather than continue to build them up, he tears them down, just as he physically does to Pentheus. Spatial semiotics allows insight into the separation between Dionysus and Pentheus that leads to the god going unrecognized by the mortals. If Pentheus would have been able to accept the god without being physically present to experience his power, the play would not have ended in the demise of Pentheus and his entire household.

Alongside the spatial constructions, the *Bacchae* is rich with metaphorical details that depict Dionysus and his followers as foreign. The first description comes in the opening words of the chorus. The chorus members themselves are foreigners from Asia, and as they sing their praises to Dionysus, they discuss their attire. Their outfits are composed of a sacred fawn skin garment, long, flowing hair, and crowns of ivy, oak, and pine (Eur. *Bac.* 105-151). This form of dress is very different than the civilized dress of the Greeks, which often consisted of robes made from wool.¹⁰⁸ However, this otherness in attire is associated with the Persians and cities to the East because of preconceived notions of that territory held by the Greeks. In 440 BCE, Herodotus published his history of the Persian War, and his account of the event painted a particular image of the Persians. In his essay “Persia as seen by the West,” L. Lockhart states, “From him we get a picture of a race of hardy shepherds, inhabiting a rugged and inhospitable land and led by a king (Cyrus the Great) of great military ability, invading and overrunning

¹⁰⁷ Mikalson 1991:51.

¹⁰⁸ Cole 1994:36.

country after country in the East.”¹⁰⁹ This description of lifestyle aligns well with the attire of the Bacchae. They are dressed in rugged animal clothing and they exist up in the mountains with the animals, similarly to the Eastern shepherds described by Herodotus. The Mesopotamians were also known for wearing clothes such as sheep skins, which pairs with the understanding that Dionysus came from the East.¹¹⁰

Dionysus originally spent time in the East and developed his cult there, so the Bacchic cult’s attire does fit his back story; but the idea that the Theban women would also dress in this attire challenges the Theban society. Clothes are a physical representation of the separation between Dionysus and the people of Thebes, and by having the Theban women dress like him, he is slowly blurring the lines between the separate societies, despite their insistent rejection of him. The clothing also represents the distinction between the wild Bacchic cult and the civilized Greek city-state. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, this is the clothing of shepherds, who were not members of the city. Instead, they roamed the countryside with their flocks.

Nature metaphorically represents Dionysus’ power as greater than Pentheus’. Dionysus has control over the natural world, which exists up in the mountains. This point is furthered by the other symbols associated with the Bacchic cult, such as the fawn skin clothing, the crowns of vine, and the pinecone thyrsos. At first consideration, the domain of Pentheus appears to be the stronger of the two. He has men, metal weapons, and all the luxuries a city has to offer. However, Dionysus asserts his power through nature in two separate manners. The first is the battle between the men and the women. A messenger relays to Pentheus that the women escaped from the jails and ran back to the mountains to worship the god. However, in their escape, they

¹⁰⁹ Lockhart 1953:321.

¹¹⁰ Houston 2002:106.

are described fighting the men and their metal weapons with their pinecone thyrsos, and the women are victorious. Despite the physical strength and superior weaponry, the men are not able to overcome the natural forces directed by Dionysus.

The second natural element controlled by Dionysus is human nature itself. Despite the manmade cities and the technological advances, humans are still a part of nature; and therefore, they fall under the dominion of Dionysus. He exercises this power by setting madness among the women, who flock to his side and do his bidding. This is common understanding of Bacchic behavior, as many cult members were considered to be in a divine frenzy as they performed rituals and sacrifices outside cities.¹¹¹ The most extreme case of this is the attack of Pentheus, since his own mother is driven to kill him with her hands at the will of Dionysus. The god clearly demonstrates that his power is greater than that of the king, and he would have made a much greater ally than he did enemy.

We have seen that the power of Dionysus did not go unrecognized because there was a lack of power; he was an extremely powerful deity and a very formidable opponent. However, Pentheus' stubbornness and his refusal to accept the god into the city led to the downfall of his entire family. It is interesting to consider this play in the context of the Great Dionysia, a religious holiday devoted to the god Dionysus. Athens welcomed Dionysus into their city, and this acceptance led to one of the greatest festivals of all time. The following historical context relates the last five years of the Peloponnesian War with a specific focus on the general Alcibiades. Similarly to Dionysus, he was not accepted by the Athenian government, and that eventually led to the loss of the Peloponnesian War. This comparison ultimately leads to a pro-

¹¹¹ Puhvel 1987:137-8.

war interpretation of the play, because it demonstrates that the Athenians were not wrong in their endeavor. The war was the right decision despite the loss; the Athenians just failed to align themselves properly with a dominant leader.

The Historical Context

The last five years of the Peloponnesian War consisted of the two sides trading battles throughout the Mediterranean world, but the Athenians possessed a powerful weapon on their side: the general Alcibiades. Alcibiades was born around 450 BCE to aristocratic Athenian parents. When his father died in 447/446, he became a ward to Pericles alongside his brother, and this exposed him to the most intellectual men of the time.¹¹² When Alcibiades came of age, he entered the military, which was right around the start of the Peloponnesian War. He began as a hoplite, despite the means to enter the cavalry, and he quickly proved himself to be an intelligent individual and rose through the ranks, both militarily and publically.¹¹³

Alcibiades was an ambitious young man, and this is demonstrated by Thucydides first mentioning him in discussion of the winter of 421/420 BCE, a time when the Athenians were contemplating peace agreements with Sparta.¹¹⁴ Alcibiades went against the proponent for peace and advocated for further fighting. This was likely because he was a young man who wanted to further prove his worth to the Athenian population and become the superior man of the state.¹¹⁵ Alcibiades also supported the Sicilian Expedition, and Thucydides says:

¹¹² Ostwald 1986:292.

¹¹³ Ostwald 1986:292.

¹¹⁴ Ostwald 1986:297-8.

¹¹⁵ Ostwald 1986:298.

ἐνήγε δὲ προθυμότατα τὴν στρατείαν Ἀλκιβιάδης ὁ Κλεινίου, βουλόμενος τῷ τε Νικίᾳ ἐναντιοῦσθαι, ὧν καὶ ἐς τᾶλλα διάφορος τὰ πολιτικὰ καὶ ὅτι αὐτοῦ διαβόλως ἐμνήσθη, καὶ μάλιστα στρατηγῆσαί τε ἐπιθυμῶν καὶ ἐλπίζων Σικελίαν τε δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ Καρχηδόνα λήψεσθαι καὶ τὰ ἴδια ἅμα εὐτυχήσας χρήμασί τε καὶ δόξῃ ὠφελήσειν. (Thuc. 6.15.2)

Most passionately urging on the expedition was Alcibiades son of Kleinias, who wanted to counter Nicias, because he was at odds with him politically in other respects and Nicias had mentioned him critically, and who was above all eager to take command and hoped that this would enable him to conquer both Sicily and Carthage, and that by succeeding he would at the same time add to his personal wealth as well as prestige.

Thucydides continues to say that Alcibiades hoped to win over many territories in the process of this expedition, gaining wealth and popularity for himself.

Everything was going well for Alcibiades during the first 15 years of the war. He continued to gain prominence in the public sphere, he was starting to eclipse his political rival Nicias, and the Sicilian Expedition was officially approved. However, a month before the expedition would depart, Alcibiades was accused of impiety for the desecration of a bust of Hermes.¹¹⁶ An agreement was made that he would stand trial upon return from the Sicilian expedition, but suspicions grew stronger in his absence, and a ship was sent to retrieve him in the summer of 415, the same season he left Athens (Thuc. 6.61.1-5). Alcibiades feared the fate that awaited him in Athens, so he fled south to Sparta and joined their military ranks as a political exile from Athens (Thuc. 6.61.6-7). Despite Alcibiades switching his allegiances, he argued that

¹¹⁶ Ostwald 1986:323.

he was not a traitor, because he was wrongfully forced to flee his home country (Thuc. 6.92.2-4). The Spartans supported him, and he became a powerful voice within their government.

However, Alcibiades's alliance with Sparta was short lived. He quickly fell out of favor with the powerful members of the military and government, and he was considered a personal enemy of the Spartan king, Agis.¹¹⁷ Alcibiades was sentenced to death in the winter of 412/1, but he was warned about his impending execution in Sparta, and he fled to Persia (Thuc. 8.45.1). While in Persia, Alcibiades befriended powerful Satraps and worked to harm the Peloponnesian cause (Thuc. 8.45.1-2). He also communicated with Athenian forces in Samos, and they were able to recall him to Athens in the summer of 411 so that the Delian League might gain the support of the satrap Tissaphernes.¹¹⁸ Alcibiades was elected general that same summer, completed a full trip home (Thuc. 8.82.1).

After his return, Alcibiades was determined to reassert his power and prove his worth to Athens. The Hellespont was a major threshold for both sides, and the Athenians successfully held this location in 409 under his leadership.¹¹⁹ He commanded a fleet of 86 ships, and by the end of winter he destroyed a struggling Spartan fleet at Cyzicus.¹²⁰ Alcibiades established a customs port in the nearby area of Chrysopolis, and this created a steady source of income for the financially depleted Athenian fleet.¹²¹ This stability, along with the taste of success, boosted the morale of the Delian League and posed a great threat to the Peloponnesian league. Not long after

¹¹⁷ Thucydides states that Alcibiades was rumored to have had sexual relations with King Agis's wife. Despite a lack of substantial evidence, the rumors were enough for him to receive the death penalty (Thuc. 8.45.1).

¹¹⁸ Strassler 1996:526.

¹¹⁹ Sealey 1976:370.

¹²⁰ Sealey 1976:370.

¹²¹ Sealey 1976:371.

this battle, Sparta sent peace terms to Athens in the hopes of ending the conflict, but the confident Athenians quickly rejected the offer.¹²²

There was some dissention within the Athenian ranks as officers played out personal agendas within the war, but Alcibiades proved himself to be a strong leader throughout his time of service.¹²³ The capture of Calchedon and Byzantium were the focus of the entire 408 campaign season, and Alcibiades capitalized on this endeavor. He successfully conquered the Calchedon siege walls and created an arrangement for Calchedon to pay tribute to Athens, which was a financial bonus during this time of war.¹²⁴ From this location, Alcibiades sent envoys to King Darius II in Persia to negotiate a settlement, because Calchedon was under the control of Persian satraps. While the envoys were away, Alcibiades shifted his efforts to the besieging of Byzantium, which surrendered when they ran low on supplies. Alcibiades captured a couple other cities as well, giving him great control over the Hellespont. This Athenian success was crucial during this time, because the land battles near Attica were falling in favor of the Spartans.¹²⁵ However, Alcibiades was a strong strategist and an excellent commander, so his contributions were enough to sustain the war effort.

Despite the impressive resume Alcibiades had developed after his return to Athens, there were still many men at home that were not supportive of his leadership. In order to secure his political standing, Alcibiades returned home to Athens in 407.¹²⁶ He was hesitant to disembark from his ship, but he had a group of loyal friends who served as body guards during his stay, and

¹²² Sealey 1976:371.

¹²³ Thrasyllus was interested in fighting separate battles with his own men, but they eventually came to appreciate Alcibiades and his forces. The two joined in battle and celebrated much success.

¹²⁴ Sealey 1976:373.

¹²⁵ Sealey 1976:373.

¹²⁶ Sealey 1976:373.

he ultimately left the city as an elected commander supreme. While Alcibiades was away from the war, Thrasybulus raided the coast of Thrace to win back cities in support of the Athenian cause.¹²⁷ The outcome looked positive for the Delian League as they started into another year of war, but a major issue developed when they learned of Persia's allegiance to Sparta. The Athenian envoys reached Darius II too late to negotiate a settlement that would have favored the Delian League. Darius II had already sent his son Cyrus to aid their new allies, and Cyrus seized soldiers from three separate satraps to establish his forces. Cyrus met with the Spartan navarch Lysander, who possessed 70 triremes, and the two agreed to pay their forces well enough that it would entice some of the Athenians to desert.¹²⁸ Even without this cunning plan, the two men were a force to be reckoned with. They built many alliances, won the respect of their men, and worked well together. The Athenians finally met their match.

Lysander and Cyrus were a powerful duo, but they still had to contend with Alcibiades. They seized the opportunity when Alcibiades sailed away with a couple ships to settle a dispute in Clazomenae.¹²⁹ Antiochus inherited the command of the fleet in his commander's absence, but he did not handle his power well. He mobilized part of his fleet and sailed to Ephesus, which was near the fleets of Lysander. Lysander attacked this small Athenian fleet, and when the Athenian reinforcements came to aid, he destroyed them as well.¹³⁰ Altogether, Athens lost 22 ships, which was a heavy loss to such a dominant naval force.

However, the true loss occurred in the wake of the battle. Alcibiades, who was away from the Hellespont during the attacks, was given the blame for the loss. This gave his enemies

¹²⁷ Sealey 1976:374.

¹²⁸ Sealey 1976:374.

¹²⁹ Sealey 1976:374.

¹³⁰ Sealey 1976:375.

a platform to speak out against him, and he officially lost his command in 406.¹³¹ Alcibiades recalled his private forces from battle and did not assist in the war from that moment on. The loss of Alcibiades's leadership was significant for the entire Delian League, because he was the best strategist in the entire Athenian military. To the misfortune of the Athenians, his successors did not live up to his legacy.

The Athenians struggled with leadership for the remainder of the war, because Alcibiades had been such an impactful general in their fight, and the Athenians were not able to find a suitable replacement. Conon stepped up as the leading strategist for the military. He immediately found himself in trouble when the current navarch for the Spartan army, Callicratidas, cut him off from Samos, which served as a safe port for the Athenians.¹³² Conon retreated to Mytilene, where he was surrounded by the Spartans on both land and sea. However, he was able to get a message to Athens about the situation, and reinforcements arrived to defeat Callicratidas and his men. The Spartans lost 69 ships in this battle, and this massive loss led to the next attempt at peace.¹³³ The Spartans sent an offering to end the war and have both sides keep their current holdings, with the succession of Deceleia to the Athenians. The Athenians refused these terms, and the fighting continued.¹³⁴

The aftermath of the naval battle at Mytilene led to further leadership issues within the Athenian army. There were eight generals who were sent back out to the battle location to retrieve the shipwrecked bodies.¹³⁵ However, a large storm came through the area, and 6 of the generals returned home for their own safety. The people were not pleased with this turn of

¹³¹ Sealey 1976:375.

¹³² Sealey 1976:375.

¹³³ Sealey 1976:375.

¹³⁴ Sealey 1976:376,

¹³⁵ Sealey 1976:376.

events, and they accused the generals of impiety for abandoning the bodies. The generals were put to trial with a single vote to determine their guilt, and they were not allowed the opportunity to plead their cases. They were all found guilty, and the 6 who fled the storm were executed.¹³⁶ The Athenians were drastically decreasing the number of intelligent and experienced men they had to serve as military leaders. They were allowing personal political pursuits to come before the war effort, and they were killing their own leaders. This type of distraction was exactly what the Peloponnesian League needed to bring this war to an end.

The year 405 marks the beginning of the major Spartan push to end the war. At this time, Conon had been elected commander supreme by the Athenians once more, and Lysander was officially the second in command in Sparta, while unofficially the leader of the Spartan naval forces.¹³⁷ Lysander decided to cut off the Athenian grain supply by taking over the straits of the Hellespont that carry this product. He fought the Athenians for control of the entire region, and he won it back in little time.¹³⁸ Cities of the Aegean were also willing to align themselves with Sparta, so Lysander established oligarchies in these lands.¹³⁹ Athens was rapidly losing a grip on the war, and things only worsened. Pausanias, one of the Spartan kings, brought troops into Attica on foot, and Lysander brought 150 ships to sever the Athenians from the sea.¹⁴⁰ They were now in a compromised position, with forces surrounding by land and sea, as well as a lack of food. The time had finally arrived for the Athenians to submit peace negotiations. They offered Agis, the second Spartan King, terms that included the ability for the Athenians to keep their fortifications. Agis rejected their proposal, stating that they were not in a position to make

¹³⁶ Sealey 1976:376.

¹³⁷ Sealey 1976:376.

¹³⁸ Sealey 1976:376.

¹³⁹ Sealey 1976:376.

¹⁴⁰ Sealey 1976:377.

such demands.¹⁴¹ He wanted to force his opponents into submission and prevent them from rising up again.

The official peace treaties were finalized in 404. The Spartans ordered the Athenians to tear down part of their long walls, give up their overseas possessions, recall all those they sent into exile, diminish their fleet, and follow Sparta into battle.¹⁴² Despite these demands, the Athenians were still able to keep all of Attica intact. The terms were difficult, but considerably less harsh than some of the punishments Athens herself decreed over the course of the war. The fighting was over, and the two super powers were able to coexist once again.

Alcibiades and Dionysus: A Journey down the Same Path

The similarities between Alcibiades and Dionysus are strong; these two figures were wrongfully pushed out of their home countries, they each harbor anger toward their respective cities, and they were both powerful allies to have. A closer look at the parallels between the semiotic revelations and the historical background demonstrates further similarities that support an interpretation that Alcibiades and Dionysus were seen as comparable figures. This interpretation provides two positive war sentiments. Considering the play in 405, the year it was originally performed, it demonstrates a mistake the Athenians should avoid. The Thebans were not quick enough to recognize the power of Dionysus, and thus, they lost him as an ally and their city government collapsed. The Athenians should also recognize that they need Alcibiades, because their leadership was collapsing and their city would soon fall as well. If the play was

¹⁴¹ Sealey 1976:377.

¹⁴² Sealey 1976:378.

reflected upon after the war, it shows that the war itself was not a poor decision, nor were the gods against Athens; the people just failed to recognize that Alcibiades was a necessity for success, just as Thebans failed to recognize their god, Dionysus. The following discussion highlights these points and further supports these interpretations.

The Peloponnesian War was fought outside the city of Athens. The Spartans did move into Attica, but the final phase of the war, between 409-406, took place in the Hellespont, which was a fair distance away from Athens. Alcibiades did a great portion of his fighting in this location and surrounding areas. Because of this, all of his actions were unseen by the Athenian men and leaders at home. They did not witness his victories or his style of command. They were not privy to all of his plans and strategies, and they did not understand the value of his work. This is similar to the experience of Dionysus. He founded his cult in a foreign land, and the people of Thebes had heard of his ability, but they could easily dismiss it as untrue. Then when he returned to his birth home, all of his divine actions occurred in the dark or in the mountains. Therefore, his brilliance went unrecognized by those who were in power.

The distance between Alcibiades and Dionysus and their respective cities also led to the growth of rumors. Alcibiades was rumored to have caused Athens' loss to Lysander and Cyrus, despite the fact that he had left the troops in the command of Antichos and ordered him to not engage with the enemy. This rumor spread throughout Athens and was promoted by his adversaries, and it had such a great effect that Alcibiades was not reelected as commander supreme. Dionysus was in a similar position. His family spread the rumor that he was not truly the son of Zeus and that his mother was merely pregnant by a mortal. They said that she was struck down by Zeus for lying about the child's father, rather than as an act of revenge from Hera. The rumor gained so much momentum that Pentheus banned all worship of Dionysus

when he took the position as king. Both Alcibiades and Dionysus were excluded from their rightful seats of power in the cities they called home.

Dionysus and Alcibiades had further trust issues develop because of their time in Persia. Alcibiades first spent time with the enemy, Sparta, and then he defected to Persia. His ability to trade alliances so easily alarmed the Athenians, and then his time in the exotic land of Persia further raised their suspicions. Similarly, Dionysus spends time developing his cult in the East, and they bring the traditional Eastern attire with them into Thebes. This foreign influence concerns Pentheus, and he continues to treat Dionysus as a barbarian, rather than a god. However, both figures did not spend time in the east on their own accord. They were not welcomed in their home countries, and they were forced to seek shelter elsewhere. Alcibiades and Dionysus were figures of poor circumstance more so than poor character.

Despite each figure's power going unrecognized, they each proved themselves to be very influential individuals. When Alcibiades was in Persia, he worked to move the satraps against the Peloponnesian League, while also arranging deals to get himself back into Athens. He was able to successfully orchestrate these actions from the winter of 412 to the summer of 411. Dionysus also exhibited great control over the city of Thebes. He controlled the outcome of the battle of women against men, and he controlled the minds of the people in the city. Dionysus and Alcibiades were individuals who knew how to manipulate situations and exercise control over any situation.

These two powerful figures were removed from the cities; thus, that meant that someone else must try to fill those roles in each case. In Athens, they struggled with leadership for the remainder of the war. Conon was the next commander supreme, and he did a sufficient job. However, he did find himself trapped at Mytilene shortly after he takes command, and he was

saved by the sheer luck of a message making its way to Athens for reinforcements. Without the additional 130 ships sent to him, Conon would have lost the war immediately. In the tragic world, Pentheus believes he is the strongest ruler in the land. He has no need for this Bacchic ruler in his city; he can rule without any divine ally. However, he is not able to control the women driven into madness, nor is he able to prevent his grandfather Cadmus from ascending into the mountains. Even the prisoners he captures all escape. Despite the rejection, Dionysus has better control of the city than the king.

A final similarity resides in the death of Pentheus and the execution of the Athenian generals. In the *Bacchae*, Pentheus is trying to take back control of his people by sneaking into the mountains. He wants to see the women in action so he can carry out a punishment, as any strong leader could. That plan failed when his own mother and aunts murder him by ripping him to pieces. In the same way, the Athenian generals tried to carry out their jobs by retrieving the bodies of the shipwrecked soldiers. But, when a storm prevented them from carrying out their mission, the people at home were eager to execute them for failing the mission. Agave was in a state of madness, and therefore, she killed her son, the king. Similarly, the Athenians had an unstable government, and they too were driven to kill their leaders. Although one is done through divine intervention, both of these incidents demonstrate a government tearing itself apart. Agave and her sisters are part of the royal family, and they kill their own family member and king. The Athenian government is also killing members of its own group, as it executes multiple leaders. While the maenads as a whole do not represent the Athenian government, this particular scene that highlights Agave and her sisters ripping apart Pentheus is comparable to the unrestful nature of the Athenian government at this time.

Neither story has a happy ending. Cadmus and Agave admit their faults too late to save their grandson/son or themselves. Dionysus banishes them from Thebes, and Cadmus must live out his days with his wife as a serpent. The Athenians never realize the mistake they made when they dismissed Alcibiades, and their story ends with the loss of the Peloponnesian War.

There is a distinct difference between the tragedy and the history worth addressing. In the *Bacchae*, Dionysus is the source of the Theban problems. He is exacting revenge and bringing down the royal family. Alcibiades, on the other hand, retires to his home for the remainder of the war. He does not destroy the Athenian leadership or harm their war effort. He simply exits the political and military spheres. Despite these differences, the two scenarios followed predictable patterns. As discussed in the first chapter, tragedy is a dramatic interpretation of the human existence, and the gods exist in a different sphere governed by different codes.¹⁴³ Dionysus has the power, capability, and right to exact revenge. He was not only ignored, but completely unrecognized as a divine entity. Just as Aphrodite may punish Hippolytus, Dionysus may punish the Theban royal family. Alcibiades, however, has no power in his situation. He could attempt to attack Athens with his private fleet, but he would be betraying his people and entering a battle with the odds against him. While it may seem as though he already betrayed his people when he went to Sparta, Alcibiades was rejected from Athens at that time, and therefore, he did not belong to them. So rather than retaliate when Alcibiades was not re-elected general, his best option was to withdraw himself completely from the Athenian military. His loss would have a dramatic effect on the war effort, and that would be revenge enough.

¹⁴³ Parker 1997:151.

Hippolytus has demonstrated a clear pro-war message through its justification of violent events. The *Bacchae*'s message is not as clear. It may still be understood as pro-war, but rather than celebrating or justifying military actions, it sends different messages. The first message is one of warning. If this play was being discussed in its original performance year of 405, the Athenians were close to losing the war at that time. Lysander and Cyrus were a lethal pair at sea, and the Spartans had always been superior on land. If the Athenians wanted to win, they needed to take a drastic measure; they needed to recognize that they did not currently possess the leadership capable of winning a war. The war was becoming too political among the leaders, and they needed to redirect their energy behind someone of strength. This is similar to the reign of Pentheus, who is too concerned with his own position of leadership to accept that there may be a stronger individual who would prove to be a great ally. He could have had a god as a σύμμαχος, but instead he denied Dionysus' power. Alcibiades could have been asked to come out of retirement, and his leadership could have been the key to their success. The Athenians could have avoided the mistakes of the mythological Thebans, and hopefully their story would have avoided the tragic ending. Unfortunately, these measures were never taken, and the Athenians fell.

The second message is one of explanation. Euripides' fame continued long after his death, so it is reasonable to believe his work stayed relevant as well. If the tragedy was discussed after the war ended, the *Bacchae* could have been seen as an explanation for the loss of the war. The underappreciation of Alcibiades and the leadership trouble that followed led them down a dangerous path. The war as a whole was not a poor decision, and their efforts were strong. They just did not have the proper commanders to finish the job. The historical Greeks were very skeptical of the Maenads, so they would have related to Pentheus' hesitation to accept

Dionysus as a god. They did, in fact, feel similarly in regards to Alcibiades. They were skeptical of him because of his history with foreign territories. While it was well-intended, neither the Athenians nor Pentheus put the people's needs before their skepticism, and it resulted in their downfalls.

Conclusion

Euripidean tragedy has many different themes, angles, and characters to explore. This particular study has shown that although Euripides himself was opposed to war, a semiotic lens combined with the historical context reveals pro-war sentiment within his texts. This goes against common scholarship on the topic, because the texts are often viewed through the constricting lens of authorial intent. Removing this narrow view allows the reader to experience the text as a member of the audience would experience the play in 5th century Athens.

The Great Dionysia was simultaneously a religious and political event. The playwrights carefully constructed their plays around central themes and political ideas, so that the messages could be carried by familiar figures with nuanced characterizations. The gods and goddesses often served as these familiar figures in Euripides's works, which reflected the civic religion of the time, yet also encompassed an artistic rendering of the divine. For example, civic and tragic gods both received offerings and prayers, but tragic gods were known to intervene in human life if they felt scorned, whereas civic religion did not want to offend the gods, but also did not expect drastic consequences. This information helps understand the expectations held by the audience members of the gods as character in the plays.

This thesis first analyzes *Hippolytus* through a semiotic and historical analysis to develop a possible audience interpretation. The play was first performed in 428, the year of the Mytilene Revolt. The city of Mytilene refused to pay taxes and provide men to the Delian League, violating their duty to Athens, because they felt their ideals better aligned with Sparta. Athens attacked and put an end to the revolt, while Sparta did not intervene in the conflict. This semiotic analysis reveals a similar situation occurring within *Hippolytus*, between Hippolytus

himself, Aphrodite, and Artemis. Spatial semiotics, such as the distance between Artemis on the roof and the mortals on the ground, remind the audience of the drastic power difference between the young mortal and the two goddesses, just like Mytilene in contrast to Athens and Sparta. This comparison is furthered by the idea that Aphrodite is just in her revenge against Hippolytus, because he did not pay her respect and sacrifice to her – a hubristic act. Metaphorical analysis also demonstrates Artemis and Aphrodite as equal opponents by describing love as a weapon Aphrodite wields similarly to Artemis' bow and arrow. This interpretation demonstrates pro-war sentiment by showing that Aphrodite, and comparably Athens, was justified in attacking those who did not honor their agreement to her.

Then I argued that the *Bacchae* may be read as an expression of unrecognized power, which equates the character Dionysus and the historical figure Alcibiades. Performed in 405, a year before the end of the war, the *Bacchae* took the stage during a time of poor leadership. Alcibiades was dismissed from Athenian forces because he was mistrusted by many and his battle strategy went unrecognized. Then the subsequent leaders were underperforming, and the Athenians were close to losing the war. The *Bacchae* reflects another instance of poor leadership, as Pentheus refuses to recognize the power of Dionysus and he mistrusts the Eastern influence Dionysus brings. Spatial semiotics reveals that Dionysus's power is largely unrecognized as it primarily exists in the mountainous area, while in the city he performs out of sight from any of the civilians. Metaphorical analysis takes a close look at the use of Eastern clothing on the Bacchic cult members and the effect it has on the members of the city. This analysis also leads to the interpretation that the war was not a poor decision; instead, the Athenians were too stubborn to accept that they needed the help of Alcibiades.

Euripidean works are important to study in their original context, but that does not mean they are irrelevant today. The tragic genre was most influential in the 5th century BCE, but it has continued to live on today in a variety of manners. Some authors have adopted the genre and crafted it to fit the time period, such as Shakespeare and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Their works discuss and critique current societal issues through elaborated stories, similarly to the work of Euripides and the other great tragedians. Other subsequent artists continue to deliver these ancient works centuries later, such as modern day theater companies. Sometimes they perform them out of respect for the authors and the enjoyment of the audience, and other times they perform them as political messages for our current time. However they may be presented, the topic remains relevant to this day.

This particular tragic investigation is important for two main reasons. The first reason is that the interpretation of these tragic works in the 5th century is crucial to understanding the Athenian population as a whole. It has been well established that Euripides is an anti-war writer. His lifestyle and works contribute to our modern day understanding that the man created politically charged plays that condemned the decisions of his countrymen. However, there are two major flaws with this type of thinking. The first flaw is the limiting factor associated with this idea. Because Euripides is known as an anti-war writer, his plays are rarely explored through any other understanding. This greatly inhibits the analytical process and allows scholars to ignore any contradicting evidence. For example, Dionysus would not traditionally be viewed as a representation of Alcibiades, because that would imply that a powerful force in the Peloponnesian War was being represented as a god. Euripides would not intentionally create a character like that. However, Euripides's intention is not the only interpretation that is valid. If the audience reacts to Dionysus in such a way that they are reminded of their former leader, the

play immediately takes on a different meaning. The many possible audience interpretations are relevant as well, because they had a large impact on the effects of the play.

The other flaw is that we must understand his plays through the eyes of the Athenians. What may look like an anti-war piece from a modern perspective could translate as a pro-war piece to a 5th century Athenian. *Hippolytus* is a great example of this. It originally comes across as a very negative story with Aphrodite as the clear villain. She has Hippolytus killed and his entire family suffer as revenge for his disrespect towards her. However, the historical Athenians understood that they were to honor and worship all of the gods. Hippolytus clearly defies the rules of the relationship, and Aphrodite's actions are justified. Therefore, they would not see her as a monstrous villain in the same way a modern reader would interpret the story. Likewise, Athenian punishment of Mytilene would be justified.

In order to understand the historical Athenians, our presuppositions about the text and the time must be loosened. If we study these texts outside knowledge unavailable to the individuals experiencing these events in real time, we will not be able to understand the true impact of these works. We will not be able to understand the feelings and motives that drove the average Athenians to action. We will not be able to compile a real sense of the Athenian experience. As a classicist, I believe these are the intriguing topics. I want to know how certain messages were conveyed, and how audience members reacted to particular symbols. The answers to these questions can only be pieced together to such a degree, but I believe that this investigation into the interpretation of Greek tragedy within its own time period lends another piece to the puzzle.

The use of tragedy today gets at the second reason of importance for this study. As I previously mentioned, tragedy is often performed today, and sometimes it still carries a political message. According to an article by Mark Chou, 4,246 performances of Greek tragedy were

recorded between 1953 and 2003.¹⁴⁴ These works are still highly relevant and frequently showcased. However, sometimes they turn into something greater than just a beautiful performance. In 2004, a rendition of the *Trojan Women* in Australia sparked a surge of anger against the Australian government, as audience members compared the events in the play to their participation in The Iraq War.¹⁴⁵ They saw themselves in the Greek soldiers, despite the centuries of separation and the physical space between Australia and Iraq. The Australians were still able to sympathize with the slaughter of women and children in an adult male's war, even though it painted their side as the killers. Some messages are powerful enough to carry through time, and their messages still strike a chord today.

The study of these ancient tragedies and their possible interpretations is important to the utilization of them in modern forums. Certain works can be powerful during the political events of the modern area. They can support or oppose a variety of different causes around the world. However, they can only be used to sway an audience if the performer can predict the audience reactions. The intention of performing the *Trojan Women* was not to arouse anti-war sentiment; it was simply a selection by the theater department. However, that is of little relevance since the entire audience left with the Iraqi conflict in mind.¹⁴⁶ The audience has the ultimate control over the message of the play, but the director must know how to control the audience. They cannot do that unless they explore all of the possible meanings within the plays.

The study of interpretations, especially through semiotics, lends greater understanding of the works as a whole and the people who interact with them. It explores the way humans connect with and respond to art, which can be a powerful force in the world. Euripides created

¹⁴⁴ Chou 2011:132.

¹⁴⁵ Chou 2011:131-2.

¹⁴⁶ Chou 2011:132

many incredible works that are just as impactful now as they were in his time, and he deserves a great amount of recognition and study for that accomplishment. He remains as not only a name, but a voice in the world, which is an honor that many Greek men died in an attempt to achieve. As he continues to speak, we will continue to listen, and hopefully, we will learn more insight into the ancient world as well as our own.

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