

DE GRUYTER

*Poulheria Kyriakou,
Antonios Rengakos (Eds.)*

WISDOM AND FOLLY IN EURIPIDES



TRENDS IN CLASSICS

DE
G

Wisdom and Folly in Euripides

Trends in Classics – Supplementary Volumes

Edited by
Franco Montanari and Antonios Rengakos

Scientific Committee

Alberto Bernabé · Margarethe Billerbeck

Claude Calame · Philip R. Hardie · Stephen J. Harrison

Stephen Hinds · Richard Hunter · Christina Kraus

Giuseppe Mastromarco · Gregory Nagy

Theodore D. Papanghelis · Giusto Picone

Kurt Raaflaub · Bernhard Zimmermann

Volume 31

Wisdom and Folly in Euripides

Edited by
Poulheria Kyriakou and Antonios Rengakos

DE GRUYTER

ISBN 978-3-11-045225-9
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-045314-0
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-045228-0
ISSN 1868-4785

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2016 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston
Logo: Christopher Schneider, Laufen
Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck
♻️ Printed on acid-free paper
Printed in Germany

www.degruyter.com

Table of Contents

I General

Luigi Battezzato

Euripides the Antiquarian — 3

Martin Hose

Euripides-Poet of irritations — 21

G.O. Hutchinson

Gods wise and foolish: Euripides and Greek literature from Homer to Plutarch — 37

Maria Serena Mirto

‘Rightly does Aphrodite’s Name begin with *aphrosune*’: Gods and Men between Wisdom and Folly — 45

Ruth Scodel

Wisdom from Slaves — 65

II Individual Plays

Laura McClure

Hearth and Home in Euripides’ *Alcestis* — 85

John Gibert

The Wisdom of Jason — 105

Justina Gregory

The Education of Hippolytus — 121

Poulheria Kyriakou

Wisdom, Nobility, and Families in *Andromache* — 137

Katerina Synodinou

Wisdom through Experience: Theseus and Adrastus in Euripides' *Suppliant Women* — 155

Andrea Rodighiero

'Sail with your fortune': Wisdom and Defeat in Euripides' *Trojan Women* — 177

Matthew Wright

The Significance of Numbers in *Trojan Women* — 195

Andreas Markantonatos

The Delphic School of Government: Apollonian Wisdom and Athenian Folly in Euripides' *Ion* — 209

David Konstan

Did Orestes Have a Conscience? Another Look at *Sunesis* in Euripides' *Orestes* — 229

Anna Lamari

Madness Narrative in Euripides' *Bacchae* — 241

Seth L. Schein

The Language of Wisdom in Sophokles' *Philoctetes* and Euripides' *Bacchae* — 257

Bernd Seidensticker

The Figure of Teiresias in Euripides' *Bacchae* — 275

Davide Susanetti

The *Bacchae*: Manipulation and Destruction — 285

P. J. Finglass

Mistaken Identity in Euripides' *Ino* — 299

III Reception

David Sansone

Whatever Happened to Euripides' *Lekythion* (*Frogs* 1198 – 1247)? — 319

Thalia Papadopoulou

Euripidean Frenzy goes to Rome: The Case of Roman Comedy and Novel — 335

Barbara Goff

The Leopard-skin of Heracles: traditional wisdom and untraditional madness in a Ghanaian *Alcestis* — 347

Michalis Tiverios

New Evidence for Euripides' (?) *Alkmene*: Another Look at a South Italian Vase-Painting — 365

List of Contributors — 379

Bibliography — 385

Publications by Daniel Iakov — 419

Index of Terms — 423

Index of Passages — 431

Maria Serena Mirto

‘Rightly does Aphrodite’s Name begin with *aphrosune*’: Gods and Men between Wisdom and Folly*

The anthropomorphic and allomorphic features that make the gods a more powerful copy of humans, but which also result in their being the antithesis of human nature, are a hallmark of Greek religious thought. Wisdom and folly, too, when associated with one or the other sphere, help us to notice the differences between gods and men, or indeed their similarities. The gods can be a model of wisdom, but are also capable of imposing a violent twist on human reasoning; men meanwhile try to follow the paths of rationality, to find their way in life, but also to discover the divine beings’ will and nature; alternatively, they may give in to their passions and mental blindness, but then attempt to understand what it was that triggered their madness, and may come to the conclusion that it was a vindictive or jealous divinity who struck them with a temporary delirium.

In this paper I propose to investigate how Euripides frames the phenomena of wisdom and folly, in order to distinguish between mortals and the gods. Both the triumph of reason and its breakdown are subject to the relativism that derives from human ideas of good judgement, which are apparently different from the gods’. In his tragedies, Euripides outlines characters who wonder whether it is possible to define wisdom unambiguously, as the result of cognitive effort. We will look at examples of a plausible double system of values, and at the difficulty of being able to attach coherent definitions of both wisdom and folly to the very same phenomena, which indicates the inadequacy of human language and its incapability of signifying reality. These examples bring out an interesting aspect of Euripides’ incessant exploration of the meaning of the divine.

Henk Versnel illustrates the Greeks’ various strategies for ‘coping with the gods’, especially with their being so numerous and with the apparently chaotic multiplicity of their manifestations.¹ Ancient religious experience fed precisely on the gods’ disharmony, in its attempt to discover and describe the divine in

* I would like to thank Seth Schein for his constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

1 Versnel 1981, 1990, 2011.

a coherent way, and to deal with the less predictable events of life. Moreover, the Greeks' inability to imagine the gods without the anthropomorphic features due to analogical thought processes, combined with their need to conceive of them as radically different because they possess the perfection that human nature lacks, is a consistent feature in philosophical reflection on religion, from Xenophanes onwards.² Thus, it has always been that the “gods are condemned to this schizophrenic nature of being both fundamentally different and ‘of the same race as man’. Had they been only different, they would have been both inconceivable and incommunicado; had they been only and completely ‘in the image of man’, they would have been neither gods nor interesting”.³ It is from this ambiguity that Euripides draws the key elements of a discourse which swings between questioning the true nature of the gods – echoing themes current in contemporary Sophistic thought – and traditional mythical material. The most original aspects of this can be seen in a few passages in which wisdom and folly are defined in accordance with concepts that are deprived of all absolute value: not exclusively positive or negative, but relative to a particular point of view, be that human or divine.

Referring to archaic thought, Plato affirms that the gods can pass a sort of madness on to men that is more precious than their wisdom (*Phdr.* 244 d 2–5):

The ancients, then, testify that in proportion as prophecy (μαντική) is superior to augury, both in name and in fact, in the same proportion madness (μανία), which comes from god, is superior to sanity (σωφροσύνη), which is of human origin.

This principle is linked to the observation that *mania* – connected to eros, among other things – sometimes comes with positive aspects, and can bring great benefits to people when the gods send it to them. Hence one of the ways that the gods intervene in human affairs conveys a privilege, even though it deprives individuals of rational control and takes possession of their minds.

² On Xenophanes' criticism of the anthropomorphic representation of the gods, see Sassi 2013, 302, who speaks of “an attitude of ‘epistemological prudence’ in relation to the divine, [...] developing in the wake of Xenophanes throughout the fifth century”.

³ Versnel 2011, 389 f.

1 *Folly and wisdom in the dual perspective of the Bacchae*

Euripides hints, on several occasions, at ideas later picked up in Platonic thought. One such example is when he has Tiresias insist, while celebrating Dionysus' virtues, on the intrinsic link between folly and divination, emphasising the etymological relation between the terms *mania* and *mantic*:⁴

μάντις δ' ὁ δαίμων ὄδε· τὸ γὰρ βακχεύσιμον
καὶ τὸ μανιώδες μαντικῆν πολλὴν ἔχει·
ὅταν γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ἐς τὸ σώμ' ἔλθῃ πολὺς,
λέγειν τὸ μέλλον τοὺς μεμνηότας ποιεῖ.

This god is also a prophet: for the bacchic and the manic have much mantic power: for when the god enters abundantly into the body, he makes the maddened speak the future.

Euripides' particular inclination for word play based on etymology is not the only similarity between this passage and Plato's *Phaedrus*: in both texts, we notice how far things have come since the beginning of the high season of Attic tragedy, when Aeschylus trusted Zeus' wisdom so much as to suggest, to whoever might have doubted it, that such wisdom is also achieved by imposing sufferings on mortals, from which they may learn to be wise (A. Ag. 160 – 181). In Euripides' plays the boundary separating the human from the divine is crossed in both directions, with unpredictable results, and there is no longer a moral project or a divine model of virtue that mortals might be able to intuit. In the same contexts, folly represents both the traditional punishment for those who resist a cult and oppose a god's power, and also a form of possession, through which a god is able to broaden the mortal devotee's cognitive horizons. The *Bacchae* displays the full range of the phenomenology of delirium in a particularly disturbing manner: anyone who, like Pentheus, fails to recognise Dionysus' divine nature and stubbornly opposes the spread of his rites in Thebes is labelled as "mad"

⁴ E. Ba. 298 – 301 (text and translation are cited from R. Seaford's edition of the *Bacchae*). Immediately before the passage of the *Phaedrus* just mentioned, Plato describes the evolution of the adjective that qualifies the art of prophecy; he claims that it is derived from an original word μανική, a term chosen by the ancient legislators who established the Greek vocabulary, because of its connection with μανία; contemporary people, however, oblivious to beauty and not realising this connection with the *mania* sent by god, introduced a τ transforming the word into μαντική (244 c 1 – 5).

(326, *μαίνη γὰρ ὡς ἄλγιστα*, “For you are behaving madly in the most painful way”); Dionysian *mania* spreads among the Asian maenads, successfully conveying the exaltation that guarantees bliss and purity (135–169), yet later cruelly strikes king Pentheus and the Theban women guided by the sisters of Semele – indeed, all relatives of Dionysus who fail to recognise his divine origins. They experience an atrocious madness: instead of enabling them to escape everyday life, free themselves from all social and rational constraints, and enter into a joyous communion with their god, the ‘unbelievers’ *mania* turns on their nearest and dearest, clouding their reason so much that a mother kills and dismembers her son. It is heart-rending to see Agave, as she regains her senses, asking her father: Πενθεῖ δὲ τί μέρος ἀφροσύνης προσῆκ’ ἐμῆς; (1301, “What part of my folly belonged to Pentheus?”). The elderly Cadmus can only point out their shared obstinacy in resisting the cult of the god born of Agave’s sister and Zeus, a hostility that has brought ruin on the whole royal line. Disguised as a stranger and priest of the new cult, Dionysus appears on stage to exhort “his” god to chastise Pentheus, while in fact expressing his own strategy with wild joy: the punishment that will bring the ungodly antagonist to his death unfolds from the madness that will creep into his mind, persuading him to dress up as a woman in order to attend the Maenads’ rites (850–853):

τεισώμεθ’ αὐτόν. πρῶτα δ’ ἔκστησον φρενῶν,
 ἐνεῖς ἐλαφρὰν λύσσαν· ὡς φρονῶν μὲν εὖ
 οὐ μὴ θελήσῃ θῆλυν ἐνδύναϊ στολήν,
 ἔξω δ’ ἐλαύνων τοῦ φρονεῖν ἐνδύσεται.

Let us take vengeance on him. First put him outside his mind,
 sending into him a light-headed frenzy; for in his right mind
 he will never wish to put on female dress,
 but if he drives off the course of sanity he will put it on.

Dionysus thus sarcastically draws a boundary between wisdom and folly along essentially human lines.⁵ Only madness planted in his mind by the god will lead Pentheus to abandon his rigid sense of dignity and don a costume that mocks his fierce manly pride, and it is precisely this madness – a sign of bliss for the devout – that paves the way to the *theomachos*’ ruin. Even so, the idea that a balanced sense of reason should result in his refusing clothing that would both give him an effeminate appearance and make him similar to the feared stranger belongs to Pentheus’ per-

5 In ll. 343–346 Pentheus threatens Cadmus, who wanted to put a crown of ivy on his head, defining his participation in the rites as ‘madness’.

spective, not Dionysus'. The women of the chorus also appear to be witnesses to two different types of madness (399–400), when they use the participle of the verb *μαίνομαι* to indicate the 'insanity' of the perverse men who wish to trespass beyond the boundaries imposed on mortal nature.⁶ It is my belief that this oscillation demonstrates how the same terminology can change its meaning with a change of point of view: the chorus celebrates the wisdom of the followers of Dionysus and the folly of the Bacchic delirium, which brings joy to the initiated and frees them from pain; meanwhile, they condemn the folly of those who hide behind their narrow rationalism, a negation of true wisdom, and refuse to recognise divine reality. Hence the god's gift is also his instrument of revenge, and the madness that takes hold of the Theban Bacchae will form the very framework for their undoing: following the Dionysian rites without believing in the divine nature of Dionysus involves a destructive and self-damaging loss of reason.

The difficulty with defining wisdom, where relationships between gods and mortals are concerned, corresponds to the vision of madness as an instrument used by the gods to bend men to their will, whether for good or for bad. In the *Bacchae*, the ambiguity of the terms in the semantic area of *σοφία* is sufficiently ostentatious as to have attracted the attention of critics and commentators, who have observed how impossible it is to discern any consistent and non-contradictory meanings for them.⁷ These words frequently occur in expressions by those who recognise Dionysus' power and see wisdom as appropriate devotion to the god: Tiresias and Cadmus (vv. 178–179, 186, 196, 359, 369), as well as the Stranger (the god himself, in disguise, 480), in his debates with Pentheus as to the meaning and content of true wisdom (489–490, 655–656).⁸ The messenger who narrates Pentheus' death describes the awful lesson taught to Agave when the god drives her to kill her son while delirious, in these terms (1150–1152):

τὸ σωφρονεῖν δὲ καὶ σέβειν τὰ τῶν θεῶν
 κάλλιστον· οἶμαι δ' αὐτὸ καὶ σοφώτατον
 θνητοῖσιν εἶναι κτῆμα τοῖσι χρωμένοις.

⁶ Roux 1972, 386, observes that this single term defines two phenomena: "il est curieux d'entendre des 'ménades' employer ce terme avec un sens péjoratif. Il y a donc une bonne et une mauvaise folie".

⁷ Cf. in particular Origa 2007, 86–91 and 116–125.

⁸ Seaford 1981, 254, on *Ba.* 480, observes: "Here ἀμαθής, which in general means ignorant or boorish, probably also carries the particular sense 'uninitiated'". Cf. Roux 1972, 415; Leinieks 1996, 257–275.

The best thing is to be moderate and to revere
the things of the gods; and I think that this is also
the wisest possession for mortals to use.

Meanwhile, the Lydian followers of the Dionysian cult who make up the chorus ask themselves about the most authentic meaning of the concept of wisdom, and express the belief that it is wise to maintain one's sense of limits, to abstain from excesses, and not to assume that practical intelligence, or cunning, constitute a form of wisdom (395–401, 427–429, 1005). Pentheus' reckless violence, and the arrogance that pushes him to despise his ancestral religion will be punished as he deserves, and the god will affirm his power over the enemy (877–881, lines repeated in 897–901).⁹ Dionysus ironically states that gentleness and self-control are the most appropriate behaviour for the wise man, calmly advising the women of the chorus (641, πρὸς σοφοῦ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς ἀσκεῖν σώφρων· εὐοργησίαν): “For what a wise man does is to exercise self-controlled gentleness of temper”, while he awaits the arrival of Pentheus, who believes he has attacked the god, chained him up and defeated him, but who has actually been the victim of a series of hallucinations. Nevertheless, when Cadmus encounters the god *ex machina*, he observes bitterly that his hostility has reached a level comparable with human excesses, even though (1348, ὀργὰς πρέπει θεοὺς οὐχ ὁμοιοῦσθαι βροτοῖς) “It is not right for gods to resemble mortals in their anger”. Dionysus's response – that the events that destroyed the ruling house of Thebes had been established since time immemorial by Zeus, his father and the highest deity (1349) – does not sound like a justification so much as a simple objective fact, which he is now reporting with some detachment.

If we had to draw a net conclusion from this analysis of the *Bacchae*, beyond simply observing that ambiguity and contradiction are this drama's signature feature, we can only avoid aporia by pointing out two distinct perspectives. Wisdom and folly are qualified in entirely different ways, depending upon whether they are seen from the divine point of view and from the point of view of men who consider religiosity and respect for the gods to be a fundamental component of knowledge, or whether they are considered by men who are overly confident

⁹ There has been much debate over the interpretation of this *refrain* in the third stasimon, which hangs on the issue of whether one assigns positive or negative meaning to τὸ σοφόν in l. 877. The use of different punctuation, and a few minor interventions in the text, have enabled some scholars to suggest that the chorus here denies that wisdom and the most beautiful gift from the gods consist in dominating one's enemy (Roux, Leinieks, Seaford); otherwise, vendetta against one's enemy would be preferred over wisdom, according to the archaic moral code that obliges one to damage one's enemies, and sees vindictive violence as a useful and specific form of wisdom (Dodds, Winnington-Ingram).

in their own intellect. E. R. Dodds observes, in relation to the antithetical characterisation of the divine Stranger and Pentheus, that: “to the σοφία of the King, the ‘cleverness’ or ‘realism’ which would measure everything by the vulgar yardstick of average experience, he opposes another kind of σοφία, the wisdom which, being itself a part of the order of things, knows that order and man’s place in it”.¹⁰ So while eager mortals expect understanding and indulgence from the gods, fearing their ability to feed on wrath and a thirst for revenge in the same way as men, and knowing full well that they would destroy weak opponents, this kind of behaviour should not be attributed to the divine figures.¹¹ Some have thought that Euripides was on the lookout for specialised vocabulary that could express, with philosophical precision, certain abstract concepts that were fundamental to Greek thought.¹² In this case, the *Bacchae* would be part of his attempt to outline an ideal model of σοφία, wisdom, that even the gods cannot fully incarnate. The human realisation of wisdom, τὸ σοφόν, which is necessarily limited though it remains a source of arrogant pride among those who set their lay knowledge against religiosity and moderation, is also measured against this same model. Even so, this tragedy perhaps demonstrates how inadequate the poet considers the linguistic system to be for the task of capturing what men want to root firmly in a fixed value system: the polymorphic reality in which we come into contact with divine power cannot be consistently and unequivocally defined in language. What that means is that the gods can mock mortals’ efforts to bring order to the chaos, since terms connected with wisdom and folly can relate to such a broad range of effects and states of mind, varying in their precise meaning from speaker to speaker. When Dionysus points out to Pentheus, who has fallen prey to a frenzied delusion of his senses, “your previous mind was not healthy, but now you have the kind of mind that you should have” (947–948), he reveals with tragic irony how well he is capable of exploiting the ambiguity that comes from this difference of perspectives. Pentheus was

¹⁰ Dodds 1960², xlv.

¹¹ See the closing lines of the prayer of Hippolytus’ servant to Aphrodite, in E. *Hipp.* 120. Cf. Dodds’ comment in Dodds 1960², xlv–xlv. Dodds solves the problems with interpretation of this tragedy, emphasising that like the basic forces of nature, “in himself, Dionysus is beyond good and evil”. The distance between the two worlds cannot, however, be reduced to such a simplification: see Seaford 1996, 30–35, for a criticism of Dodds’ reading and of other interpretations of the late 20th century, all of which are indebted, in one way or another, to Nietzsche’s understanding of the meaning of the Dionysian: as a state of primordial unity between man and nature, characterised by obscure and irrational polar impulses, and confusion over basic distinctions (*Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 1872).

¹² These conclusions are those reached by Origa 2007 following careful lexical analysis: cf. especially 120–125.

‘mad’ when he opposed him, but now he is ‘mad’ in the way Dionysus wishes: in leading him to believe he has regained his sanity, the god’s statement really alludes to a different ‘madness’, sent by the god in order to subjugate him with hallucinations that will prepare him for his violent death.

One might, however, also observe that Dionysus is a god who dissolves the basic principles on which human perception of the world is founded, including personal identity and the distinctions between things, and that as such he represents an upheaval of human reason. Should we suppose, then, that the Dionysian experience, with all its instability and unpredictability, is an exception among the many other possible human-divine relationships described by Euripides? A look at a few other significant examples is sufficient to refute this hypothesis.

2 *Aphrodite, erotic madness and the wisdom of virtue in the Hippolytus*

One of Pentheus’ misunderstandings, in rejecting Dionysus’ divinity, is a misunderstanding of the intimate connection between wisdom and moderation, and likewise between folly and lust, especially in women: the Bacchae celebrate night time rites which, in Pentheus’ eyes, are an opportunity for them to submit to Aphrodite’s power and to unbridled sensuality. The idea that the female brain interprets wisdom as cunning and deception, and willingly serves the goddess of pleasure, while only stupid women practise the chastity and temperance that male society demands of them, but which nature did not give to their gender, is a widespread and conventional prejudice. Hippolytus’ misogynistic tirade, in which he shows himself to be wary of ‘wise’ women because they might be inclined to evil and immoral actions, is a prime example of it:¹³

σοφὴν δὲ μισῶ· μὴ γὰρ ἔν γ’ ἔμοις δόμοις
εἶη φρονοῦσα πλείον’ ἢ γυναῖκα χρῆ.
τὸ γὰρ κακοῦργον μᾶλλον ἐντίκτει Κύπρις
ἐν ταῖς σοφαῖσιν· ἢ δ’ ἀμήχανος γυνὴ
γνώμη βραχεῖα μωρίαν ἀφηρέθη.

But a clever woman—that I loathe! May there never be in my house
a woman with more intelligence than befits a woman!
For Aphrodite engenders more mischief

¹³ *Hipp.* 640–644 (text and translation from the *Hippolytus* are cited from the edition by D. Kovacs).

in the clever. The woman without ability
is kept from indiscretion by the slenderness of her wit.

The danger that intelligence might be bent into transgression of customary norms is often cited in criticism of the Sophists and those who disregard civic discipline and law, believing themselves to be superior to normal people.¹⁴ In this passage, we can already see how divine action is closely associated not so much with virtue as with the worst vices, if human cunning is placed in the service of the evil. Aphrodite here, as so often, represents sexuality as a natural instinct, entirely free from regulation and from the taboos imposed by society; hence the goddess's influence causes an "intelligent" woman to make the errors to which she is predisposed by her innate female propensity for sexual transgression. On the other hand, Phaedra's nurse seems to suggest that the power of eros should not be simply attributed to the fact that the goddess presides over the sexual sphere, but to the fact that eros defies the rationality that humans need in order to make a moral choice. It would not otherwise be possible to understand how even those who are equipped with judgement and self-control are attracted to evil, despite being able to recognise it and distinguish it from good (358–361):

οἱ σώφρονες γάρ, οὐχ ἐκόντες ἀλλ' ὄμως,
κακῶν ἐρώσι. Κύπρις οὐκ ἄρ' ἦν θεός,
ἀλλ' εἴ τι μείζον ἄλλο γίγνεται θεοῦ,
ἦ τήνδε κάμῃ καὶ δόμους ἀπώλεσεν.

For the chaste—they do not will it but yet 'tis so—
are in love with disaster! Aphrodite is not after all a goddess
but something even more mighty.
She has destroyed her, me, and the house.

The agent of this misfortune is identified as “something even more mighty than a god” as a result of the nurse's inability to understand the logic governing painful

¹⁴ Cf. the overview given by Dover 1974, 116–133, of the popular belief that intelligence and morals, wisdom and moderation interfere with and confuse one another, to such an extent that the two distinct virtues σοφία and σωφροσύνη are sometimes treated, or appear to be treated, as synonyms. In particular: “in tragedy, especially in Euripides, side by side with passages in which *sophia* is some kind of expertise or intellectual ability not possessed by most people [...], it is also freely used of wise, sensitive and virtuous decisions and attitudes in the conduct of life” (119–120). Hence, since wisdom has important ethical implications, and the morality of Greek society is based on control of feminine sexuality, many reflections on the Euripidean texts that follow here refer to the most common meeting point, or point of confrontation, in mythical tradition, between the human and divine worlds: that of sexual pleasure.

and unexpected events;¹⁵ nevertheless it appears that in using this expression, the nurse has taken care not to directly attribute a blindly destructive power to the goddess who embodies pleasure and amorous desire.¹⁶ The play illustrates how Hippolytus' virtue is configured in terms of arrogant superiority, and so represents an affront to Aphrodite's power; but his punishment – of which Artemis disapproves, judging Aphrodite's excessive anger and fierce revenge against her protégé severely – is also a means of striking a blow to human ambition. A one-way piety like that of the chaste Hippolytus (who worships and respects only Artemis) is not suited to mortals, and reveals the traps hidden in σωφροσύνη, if it is privileged as the only criterion on which man's imperfect life – in defiance of natural law and its divine incarnation – is to be judged. Hence Cypris/Aphrodite is in a constant state of equilibrium, being on the one hand the physical incarnation of a powerful anthropomorphic deity, who recites the play's prologue and measures her sphere of influence in competition with other gods, and on the other hand a representation of natural necessity. If worshipping Artemis means spurning Aphrodite, if the σωφροσύνη of which Hippolytus is so proud¹⁷ is not in fact based on moderation but involves something that might resemble ὕβρις, then Euripides is pointing out the true difficulty of reconciling human morality and justice not only with theological concepts and traditional values, but also with the rationalist positions evoked in the nurse's speeches (433–476). Not even these positions, interpreting the Olympic pantheon allegorically and aristocratic ethics in a relative sense, can resolve the incoherencies of religious tradition: adjusting absolute values to the human condition and considering the natural needs and sensitive pleasures in a pragmatic way does

15 Versnel 2011, 274, 433, interprets this expression as a hyperbole, which transcends logic in order to demonstrate the inadequacy of the generic term *theos*. See also 424, for the alternation between concrete and abstract representations of Aphrodite, of which “Euripides’ *Hippolytos* provides a glaring instance”.

16 See also however ll. 443–450, in which the nurse admits the goddess' hostility to anyone who resists her, while describing her action as a natural force, to which all creatures and even the other gods are subject. Even Phaedra, revealing to the women of Troezen the phenomenology of her passion, moves from a neutral description, “When love (ἔρωσ) wounded me” (392), to an admission of her defeat in every attempt “to bear this madness (τὴν ἄνοιαν) nobly, overcoming it by means of self-control (τῷ σωφρονεῖν)” (398–399). Her decision to take her own life follows, driven by the pointlessness of her fight against the goddess who personifies love's passion: “I was unable to master Aphrodite (Κύπριν κρατῆσαι)” (400–401). When Phaedra later announces her determination to kill herself, the reference to a divine ‘enemy’ is still an explicit reference to Aphrodite, and is certainly not only a metonymy for simple love and passion (725–727).

17 Cf. *Hipp.* 949, 994f., 1013, 1100, 1365.

not bring about that happiness which Socratic thought links to virtue and knowledge of the true good. Phaedra is upset by her awareness of having been led into illicit desire by irrational forces, through a mental disorder caused by a god, but whether she comes to her senses or remains in a state of madness, she cannot avoid incurable suffering (240–241, 247–249).

Moral responsibility, then, is mitigated by blurring reason, since in the domain of Eros mortals do not seem to have sufficient autonomy to manage their own ethical choices. Or perhaps we should conclude that human fragility is particularly evident on occasions when irrational forces obstruct virtue and dominate over knowledge of the good, as well as on the difficult path that leads to a less ephemeral happiness than that found in the pleasures of everyday life.¹⁸ In the *Hippolytus* it is difficult to define human wisdom and folly without taking into account the relationship with the gods, and it is not easy to define the limits and excesses of virtue either, if human morality has no model among the gods. It is clear that any attempt to choose an independent yardstick by which to measure virtue, whether on the basis of traditional wisdom or the dialectic and linguistic expertise of sophistic thought, is destined to fail.

Furthermore, Euripides seems to reflect on the distortions caused by rhetoric, introducing the same mythical paradigm to serve conflicting arguments: Zeus' love affair with the mortal Semele first appears in the nurse's speech (451–458) and later appears again in the first stasimon when the chorus illustrates Aphrodite's destructive power (555–564). The nurse makes use of this example to persuade Phaedra to give into her passion, just as Zeus resigned himself to his love for a woman, and her speech glosses over the ruinous feminine experience of the story by focusing only on the subject of desire, the divine male. In the choral passage, on the other hand, the tale is supplemented with the woman's horrific death as she is struck by lightning, when Aphrodite 'gives her in marriage' (561, *νημφευσάμενα*) to Zeus, who appears in the majestic form of flaming thunder. The nurse's censorship of the story was necessary to adapt it to fit her scandalous doctrine, and the two different formulations of the tale focus on two thor-

18 For a balanced evaluation of the critical debate on Euripides' presumed clash with Socratic ethical intellectualism, see Lombardi 2006, 29–47. Philosophical speculation, from Socratic-Platonic thought to Aristotle's theories, is confident of the possibility of subduing passions with reason guided by knowledge of the good, but Euripides is most likely addressing an audience whose mentality remains set in traditional morality. In his plays questions are raised on the aetiology of evil, and a new ethical awareness is developed, which anticipates the outcomes of later philosophical speculation. The fallibility of virtue is once again attributed to the human heart and not to external supernatural forces, since knowing and desiring what is good is not sufficient to sustain the efforts and sacrifices virtue requires in order to keep passions under control.

oughly opposed aspects of the same mythical affair, lending support to two opposed lines of reasoning: the god is a model of moral infringement, to be imitated, and provides the perfect means of avoiding the guilty arrogance of mortals who pursue virtue at all costs; but the death of the woman Zeus loved, a victim of Eros' destructive force in this particular *mésalliance*, is an eloquent example of the risks involved in 'marriage' with a god.

3 The name Aphrodite: a meaningful invention

Doubts as to human language's capacity to correctly define the reality in which we live can also be traced back to sophistic doctrine. These doubts directly affect the names of the gods, in particular Aphrodite, who is given many names relative to various facets of her power and the areas in which she applies it. Yet in the religious mentality there was already some anxiety over not knowing how to choose the right name or appellation for the god one wanted to invoke. Plato attributes to Socrates the "precautionary formula", as efficiently defined by Catherine Rowett, which enables men to address their prayers to the gods using the correct or most pleasing name:¹⁹

Socrates: But there's a second kind of correctness, as in when we pray – our practice is to pray that "whoever they are and whatever they like to be called after, we too will call them those things, because we don't know anything else."

It is moreover interesting to note that Aphrodite's name is only explained in the *Cratylus* through a reminder of the famous folk etymology that had been in use since Hesiod (406 c7-d1): "As for Aphrodite, we need not oppose Hesiod; we can accept his derivation of the name from her birth out of the foam (ἀφρός)."

Socrates had, shortly before, associated the goddess' name with that of Dionysus, because he wanted to suggest a 'playful' etymology for both, bearing in mind that "the gods also have a sense of humour". But while this promise is maintained for Dionysus, who could be "the giver (διδούς) of wine (οἶνος), playfully called Διδούνοσος", the explanation of Aphrodite's name that follows is, as we have seen, not so

¹⁹ Pl. *Cra.* 400 e-401 a. Cf. Rowett 2013, 173f. The paper identifies, in the expressions with which believers seek assurances as to the correctness of their invocations to the gods (for example "whether you want to be called [x] or [y]", and "if this is the name by which you would like to be called"), a type of "precautionary formula" present in the literary evidence of prayer in the Archaic and Classical periods, which is reflected in Plato but also, before him, in a number of Presocratic texts.

much playful as simply the traditional one.²⁰ Elsewhere, though, the Platonic Socrates expresses a desire to address the goddess using the name that is most dear to her, or one that represents her better (*Philebus* 12 b7-c4): her most true name might well be “pleasure” (τὸ δ’ ἀληθέστατον αὐτῆς ὄνομα ἦδονὴν εἶναι), argues Philebus; yet Socrates’ concern that he might not meet with divine favour inspires in him a fear that is not κατ’ ἄνθρωπον (“My awe in respect to the names of the gods is always beyond the greatest human fear”), and so he suggests the “precautionary formula” which protects him from error: καὶ νῦν τὴν μὲν Ἀφροδίτην, ὅπῃ ἐκείνη φίλον, ταύτη προσαγορεύω· (“And now I call Aphrodite by that name which is agreeable to her”).²¹

Socrates’ behaviour in the Platonic account, when it comes to choosing a name for Aphrodite or to interpreting one, is a useful element of comparison and contrast and also enables us to see Hecuba’s unusual attitude in the *Trojan Women* in a new light. Euripides assigns the old queen, now reduced to slavery, the task of expressing her remaining hopes for divine assistance, together with her despair because her prayers had not been heard. Hecuba states her faith in original ways, which amaze her Greek interlocutor: Menelaus’ announcement that Helen, once she arrives home, is to be dragged into court and condemned to death to repay the families of the victims of the war inspires her to pray an unusual prayer, rich in philosophical echoes, but also rooted in an archaic trust that Zeus is the ultimate guarantor of justice.²²

ὦ γῆς ὄχημα κάπῃ γῆς ἔχων ἔδραν,
ὅστις ποτ’ εἶ σύ, δυστόπαστος εἰδέναι,
Ζεὺς, εἴτ’ ἀνάγκη φύσεος εἶτε νοῦς βροτῶν,
προσηυξάμην σε· πάντα γὰρ δι’ ἀψόφου
βαίνων κελεύθου κατὰ δίκην τὰ θνήτ’ ἄγεις.

You that support the earth and have your seat upon it,
whoever you may be, so hard for human conjecture to find out,
Zeus, whether you are the necessity of nature or the mind of mortal men,

20 Pl. *Cra.* 406 c 3–6. Cfr. Hes. *Th.* 188–200: alongside a series of other names, Hesiod explains how Aphrodite is the name by which the goddess is called both by men and by gods, because she is born from the foam that formed around Uranus’ genitals, cut off and thrown into the sea by his son Cronus. Aristotle adopts the same etymological derivation, taken from the *Cratylus*, but gives a ‘scientific’ explanation for this story, “observing that the choice of name reveals the ancients’ recognition that sperm is foamy in nature: *GA* 736a 18–21”: cf. Sedley 2003, 31 n. 9.

21 Cf. Rowett 2013, 175–176.

22 E., *Tr.* 884–888 (the text and translation from the *Trojan Women* are cited from the edition by D. Kovacs).

I address you in prayer! For proceeding on a silent path
you direct all mortal affairs toward justice!

This invocation sounds ‘new’ to Menelaus’ ears (889: “What does this mean? How strange your prayer to the gods is!”), but the use of the “precautionary formula” which sees the god addressed by the most appropriate name, while also identified through an exposition of his characteristics, succeeds in merging into one both orthodox modes of prayer and certain features of Presocratic theories (Diogenes of Apollonia, Anaxagoras).²³ Is this an intentional paradox? Other examples of Euripidean characters who combine intellectualism, observance of religious tradition, speculations as to the allegorical interpretation of divine anthropomorphism, and even adherence to the ancestral cult (think of Tiresias in the *Bacchae*) are, actually, neither so few nor so far between.²⁴ For our discussion here it is important to note how rationalism and orthodoxy alternate without ever excluding one another, and both contribute to shaping divine figures which satisfy the human sense of justice and morality: gods who can be defined, according to human standards, as “wise” and not “mad”, in the same way that the mortals would be “wise” and not “mad” if they rejected the most puzzling parts of the gods’ mythical adventures. One cannot therefore consider Hecuba’s ‘new’ way of praying as expressing “a reductive view of Zeus: he might be the αἰθήρ, or the law of nature, or mortal νοῦς”.²⁵ Socrates’ caution in the Platonic dialogues, on the one hand, and a number of points made by the Presocratic philosophers, on the other hand, display a shared “sense that behind the name lies a partially hidden essence, which may or may not be truly captured in some name or set of names that we are trying to apply to it”.²⁶

23 Cf. Lloyd 1984, 309–310; Egli 2003, 79–94. The definition of Zeus as “support of the Earth” presupposes an understanding of αἰθήρ as a divine element which surrounds the earth and bears its weight. To the overview in Matthiessen 1968, 699–701, of the passages and Euripidean fragments in which αἰθήρ is, as here, considered a divine power often assimilated with Zeus, we might also add the commentator’s understanding of an orphic cosmogony in the Derveni Papyrus: Zeus is the air (ἀήρ) and divine intellect, who governs the universal order and is guide and originator of all things; cf. col. XIX, 1–7, Kouremenos, Parássoglou, Tsantsanoglou 2006.

24 Cf. Mirto 2010, in particular 11–21.

25 Lloyd 1984, 310; cf. also Lloyd 1992, 107–109; Egli 2003, 92–94.

26 Rowett 2013, 192. Cf. also Versnel 2011, 50–52, who appropriately observes, in relation to the comic parodies of this doubtful formula for addressing the gods: “However, this does not detract from its evidential value. Quite to the contrary, application in comedy or, more generally, in the sphere of ironic parody and pun furnishes decisive proof that formulas and expressions were current among large sections of the population, including less educated strata” (52).

Attributing divine nature to elements of the physical or transcendental world that condition human life and determine its events is therefore only one of many – not necessarily restrictive – ways of protecting oneself in the face of supernatural power, combining anxiety and fear to create an incorrect appellation with expectations of morality and justice. In the *agon* that follows between Helen and Hecuba, when the queen of Troy challenges Helen's defence against the accusation that she was solely responsible for the war, her first argument is based precisely on a high opinion of the goddesses who had supposedly participated in the beauty contest on Mount Ida. Helen justifies her betrayal by claiming that Aphrodite accompanied the seducer, annihilating her victim's capacity for resistance, and challenges Menelaus to prove himself stronger than Zeus in finding her guilty of a weakness that is common to both gods and men (948–950; 964–965; this *topos* was already seen in Phaedra's nurse's exhortation).

By contrast, Hecuba appears not so much to deny that the judgement of Paris took place, but that it took place in the way described by Helen: it is neither believable nor logical that such powerful goddesses should have callously offered extraordinary gifts in order to gain the referee's favour. Hence she declares that she wishes to be "allied" with Hera, Athena and Aphrodite (969), as if to repay more generously those she had previously described as "bad allies", all the gods who witnessed her misfortune but were invoked in vain (469). To throw off any suspicion of "foolishness" from the three deities (972), Hecuba ridicules the supposed reason for their frivolous dispute: it was not Menelaus who demonstrated foolishness (965, ἀμαθές), in refusing Aphrodite's irresistible power, but rather those who believed the account of the competition which held that Paris awarded her the palm of beauty and was corrupted by the gift of Helen's love (981–982):

[...] μὴ ἀμαθεῖς ποίει θεὰς
τὸ σὸν κακὸν κοσμοῦσα, μὴ <οὐ> πείσης σοφούς.

[...] Do not make the gods foolish
in an attempt to gloss over your own evil nature: you will not persuade the wise.

We have already seen that denying divine wisdom, especially in the *Bacchae*, amounts to a display of foolishness and folly, while human wisdom is also qualified in relation to respect for and devotion to the gods. Hecuba, therefore, scornfully rejects the details of the gifts offered by the goddesses to Paris, and demonstrates the absurdity of calling Aphrodite into question with an interpretation of her name reminiscent of the playful etymologies in the *Cratylus* (987–992):

ἦν οὐμὸς υἱὸς κάλλος ἐκπρεπέστατος,
 ὁ σὸς δ' ἰδὼν νιν νοῦς ἐποιήθη Κύπρις·
 τὰ μῶρα γὰρ πάντ' ἐστὶν Ἀφροδίτη βροτοῖς,
 καὶ τοῦνομ' ὀρθῶς ἀφροσύνης ἄρχει θεᾶς.
 ὄν εἰσιδοῦσα βαρβάρους ἐσθήμασιν
 χρυσῶ τε λαμπρὸν ἐξεμαργώθης φρένας.

My son was very handsome,
 and when you saw him your mind was turned into Cypris.
 For mortals call all acts of foolishness Aphrodite,
 and it is proper that the goddess' name begins with the word for folly [*aphrosune*].
 You saw him resplendent in the golden raiment of the East,
 and your mind became utterly wanton.

Helen's mind, not the goddess of desire, is solely responsible for her wrong. Yet that does not imply a reductive vision of Aphrodite, as if she were simply a personification of human lust. Some critics have misunderstood this as a result of looking at it in juxtaposition with the expression Hecuba uses in l. 886 when she defines Zeus as νοῦς βροτῶν, "men's mind".²⁷ On the contrary: projecting one's own most shameful instincts onto a supernatural power is a habit typical of mortals. Gorgias, in the *Encomium of Helen* (15–19), absolves her of all responsibility, claiming that there is no autonomous will in the thoughts of one overcome with passion, even if it were only a physiological consequence of sight. Euripides overturns this line of argument, and visual perception here does not in the slightest result in any inability to counteract the influence of external forces when the perceived object transforms the mind. According to Hecuba's sarcastic denunciation, Helen, having chosen the object of her desire independently and consciously, is in fact living proof that the Greek language has 'correctly' established in Aphrodite's name the meaning of 'amorous folly', since the

27 Cf. Lloyd 1984, 312; Croally 1994, 80–81, 148–149, 156–157, 222; Egli 2003, 88–90. The intelligence that pervades humanity is understood in Hecuba's prayer to be the divine principle, the νοῦς which, according to Anaxagoras, enlivens the universe and gives shape to nature. This concept is also echoed in an aphorism that was very popular in antiquity, taken from an unknown Euripidean play (fr. 1018 Kannicht): ὁ νοῦς γὰρ ἡμῶν ἐστὶν ἐν ἐκάστῳ θεός, "Mind is the god in each one of us"; in this case we are referring to the divine nature of the intellect, but not as a transcendent principle governing all living things, so much as a faculty of the human species, as Cicero explains, *Tusc.* 1.26, 65: *ergo animus, ut ego dico, divinus est, ut Euripides dicere audeat, deus est.* Divinity cannot, however, be reduced to the emotions and content of the νοῦς in the particular sense of *Tr.* 988 (ὁ σὸς... νοῦς), where the term refers to the intelligence of a single individual, Helen, who uses it speciously to serve foolishness and intemperance. This move from the universal principle to one of its particular functions does, on the other hand, enable us to cast light on the relativity of concepts like "wisdom" and "folly", in their various forms, across the divine and human worlds.

first part of the name is shared with that of the word ‘insanity’ (*aphrosune*).²⁸ An alleged coherence in the unhappy queen’s theological ideas, then, might suggest that she denies the existence of an anthropomorphic deity called Aphrodite. Yet in relation to the gods, Hecuba instead moves through all the attitudes that we have seen to be characteristic of polytheistic religiosity: from the “precautionary formula” of her invocation to Zeus, to the humorous, etymological interpretation of Aphrodite’s name; this does not suggest the goddess’ true nature, which is unfathomable to us, but only the opinion that humans had in mind when they chose it (cf. Plato, *Cratylus* 401 a), holding her responsible for all madness (τὰ μῶρα) that arises from human lust and for which mortals seek an external explanation.²⁹ Helen is evidence that mortals are inclined to consider their desire to be due to the influence of a divine power, since they are willing neither to renounce pleasure nor to take responsibility for their perverse choices. The name Aphrodite perfectly captures the incongruity of moral law, in claiming to reflect values which we cannot know are shared by the gods: whoever violates these laws hopes to find justification for that violation in the behaviour of the ‘bad masters’, the deities, about whom many amoral tales are told, but whose true nature is ultimately inaccessible to human understanding.

4 *Cognitive and emotive diversity: the gods’ moral distance*

In the Euripidean plays, then, we have the feeling over and over again that the two poles of mental activity – wisdom founded on lucidity and self-control, and folly, when reason is clouded and the individual loses mastery of himself – are pertinent to mortals but do not have a precise equivalent, in comparable circumstances, for divine beings. In *Heracles* 655f., the chorus clearly expresses the conviction that the gods’ ζῦνεσις and σοφία do not correspond to what humans mean by these

²⁸ The adverb ὀρθῶς, in l. 990, alludes to the correctness of names (ὀρθότης τῶν ὀνομάτων) which was of central interest to, and at the heart of many analysis by, thinkers of the Sophistic movement (especially Prodicus and Protagoras). Hecuba seems to be particularly sensitive to the homophone terms being associated in order to point out links between an individual’s name and character; she alludes twice to the etymology of Helen, derived from the root *hel-* of the verb meaning “to destroy” (A., *Ag.* 687–690), in ll. 891–893 (a clear echo of Aeschylus’ lines) and 1214. This is the only section of the tragedy in which the goddess, always referred to as Cyprus (cf. 988), is called Aphrodite, making the human *interpretatio nominis* as ‘loving madness’ possible.

²⁹ Emphasised in l. 992 by the *hapax legomenon* ἐξεμαργώθης φρένας (“go raving mad”).

two terms, since they do not reward virtue as it deserves and there is no certainty as to the existence of a theodicy (εἰ δὲ θεοῖς ἦν ξύνεσις καὶ σοφία κατ' ἄνδρας [...]), “Had the gods shown discernment and wisdom by human standards [...]”).³⁰ Heracles’ story illustrates Euripides’ strategy well: pious and devoted, the hero is a victim of the madness sent by his divine stepmother. Hera inflicts this loss of reason on him out of jealousy, transforming him into the unknowing assassin of his wife and children, despite the hero not being guilty of any wrongdoing. And the ironic rebuke voiced by the gods’ messenger Iris to Lussa, divine personification of raging madness, who was sent (though unwilling) to perform Hera’s cruel order against the innocent hero, is remarkable (857): “Zeus’s wife did not send you here to show good sense (σωφρονεῖν)”. This surprising invitation to Lussa, that she interpret her role without contradicting her own nature, points out the distinction between human morality, grounded in σωφρονεῖν, and the gods’ indifference to the way men understand wisdom. It is no coincidence that in l. 347, Heracles’ mortal father Amphitryon voiced a bitter accusation to the divine father, Zeus, for being distant and apparently unsympathetic to his relatives’ fate: ἀμαθής τις εἶ θεός, ἢ δίκαιος οὐκ ἔφυς (“Either you are a fool of a god or there is no justice in your nature”). If there is any ‘wisdom’ among the gods, it is a quality that does not obviously correspond with human measures. The divine incarnation of madness, Lussa, is paradoxical in that she would like to exercise reason according to human criteria; this may be compared with Tiresias in the *Bacchae*, when he forcefully refutes the *sophismata* of men which challenge religious traditions (200 ff.), but later justifies the significance and actions of Dionysus in human culture using typically sophistic arguments (266–301). Even in this case, it is not reason itself that is devalued, but rather its application to a subject who eludes rational understanding in order to challenge it.

In response to the madness sent by the goddess, at the end of *Heracles*, the hero makes the painful decision to survive by calling on human resources and denying his divine descent from Zeus, who remains distant and incomprehensible.³¹ His mortal father is valued and preferred above his divine father, because

30 Cf. Bond on *Her.* 655 f., p. 233: “ξύνεσις καὶ σοφία are essentially human qualities, displayed by the σὺντροί and σοφοί. [...] [W]hile the words could be used by a pious theist who maintains that the gods have wisdom transcending human wisdom, the obvious implication is that the gods are inferior to men in wisdom”. Expressions of doubt or defiance at the gods’ displays of wisdom, together with explicit accusations of injustice and foolishness, recur in many Euripidean tragedies: *Andr.* 1161–1165; *I.T.* 380–386, 570–573; *El.* 971–972, 1245–1246, 1302; *Ion* 436–451, 916, 1312–1313; *Or.* 416–418; *Ph.* 85–87; *Polyidus* fr. 645 Kannicht.

31 Euripides modifies the myth of Heracles’ dual fatherhood in an original way, which enables the hero to repudiate his blood tie to Zeus: cf. Mirto 2006², 15–38.

wisdom, in the world of Euripidean tragic heroes, is the capacity to keep at a correct distance from the divine sphere: entering into too close contact results in the distinction between wisdom and madness being erased entirely. In fact, experiencing contact with the divine destroys the boundaries that keep the irrational at bay, upsetting the delicate balance that underpins civilization. Yet to fully come to terms with the gods, mortals in Euripides must also know how to give up on their utopia of independent wisdom and bow to the gods' mysterious power, which is not at all in line with mortal ethics.

