

PART I

GREEK TRAGEDY AND MECHANICAL EPIPHANY

The *deus ex machina* appears at the end of Greek tragedies ‘in order to cut the knot’, ‘to deal with loose ends’, ‘to . . . resolve all problems, and guarantee that the action is complete’.¹ Or so holds the traditional view. The mechanical entrance of a deity has persistently been seen as a structural device used by tragedians to tidy up their plots, and as a result, the *mēchanē* has never been taken seriously as an object which might have theological significance. Indeed, how could the machine do any useful religious work when, in the eyes of many scholars, there is already a vexed relationship between tragedy and religion?² To make matters worse, the *mēchanē* is considered clunky and inelegant as a piece of theatre machinery, breaking the illusion desired by the tragic genre.³

Scholars arrived at this view by combining low expectations of ancient technological potential with face-value acceptance of ancient comments on the use of the machine. Plato, Antiphanes, and various scholiasts, for example, all make passing references to the *deus ex machina* being a tragedian’s easy recourse,⁴ but it is the assessment of Aristotle’s *Poetics* which has most contributed to the dismissal of the *deus ex machina* in modern scholarship.⁵ Famously, Aristotle singles out Euripides’ *Medea* as an example of an *ex machina* epiphany which is poorly used to bring about the denouement of the plot.⁶ Aristotle believes that the *deus ex*

¹ Bieber 1961, 30; West 1987, 287; Dunn 1996, 26, respectively. Compare Spira 1960; Schmidt 1964; Wildberg 2002, 119–23, all concerned with the dramatic function of the machine.

² For example, Mikalson 1991; Scullion 2002. ³ Pucci 1994, 22n15; Dunn 1996, 42.

⁴ Pl. *Cra.* 425d; Antiph. 189 *PCG* = 191.15 Kock; Mastronarde 1990, appendix I, VII.3 and appendix II n3; Csapo-Slater 1995, IV.77G.

⁵ Compare Taplin 1977, appendix F. ⁶ Arist. *Poet.* 1454a–b.

machina should be employed solely for events external to the drama which rely on divine omniscience either because they happened earlier without humans being aware, or because they involve some sort of oracular prediction. Implicitly (or, at times even explicitly) taking Aristotle's opinion as representative of ancient thought and dramatic practice more broadly, modern commentators typically associate the suitability of the *mēchanē* for this plot-related role to its physically elevated position, without further consideration of what the mechanical epiphany looked like in discourse with other forms of visual epiphany in ancient Greek culture.⁷

In the rare cases when scholars acknowledge the power of the machine outside the plot, they still refuse to see its effect extending beyond the realm of the theatre. Christian Wildberg, for example, could not be clearer when it comes to the apparent futility of an endeavour, such as the present one, which attempts to ascertain the cultural and theological significance of the *mēchanē* as a tool of divine epiphany. 'From the point of view of the historian of religion,' writes Wildberg, '*ex machina* epiphanies are, I believe, singularly barren.'⁸ While he acknowledges that the *mēchanē* is a 'powerful and effective device to manipulate the audience, both on an emotional and cognitive level', he states that 'it is hardly a religious statement, a theological confession, or the manifestation of a doctrine or belief'.⁹ Wildberg concedes that the *mēchanē* has agency, since it can affect the audience emotionally and cognitively, but he denies that this perceived agency has any ties to the religious realities of the context to which it belongs. By contrast, I take the view that a visual representation of the divine's manifest presence in the human realm, even if embedded within a plot, is necessarily a religious statement. This is especially the case in an ancient context in which sight was so critical to the religious experience.¹⁰ When the god is depicted on stage, and we will see that there are various ways in which this is done, choices

⁷ Arist. *Poet.* 1454b. Compare Seale 1982; Mastronarde 1990, 280; Wiles 1997, 181–2. A recent exception is Budelmann 2022, whose cognitive approach complements my material and media-theoretical approach.

⁸ Wildberg 1999–2000, 245. ⁹ Wildberg 1999–2000, 245.

¹⁰ Elsner 2007; Platt 2011, 2015a.

must be made about representation which inevitably come from deep-seated conceptions about how the divine looks and acts, and about when and why gods present themselves. Furthermore, conceiving of both the crane and the theatre as media – as concepts of the middle, ‘interfaces of software and hardware that separate the symbolic from the real’¹¹ – sheds light on their power not only to reflect, but also to shape religious truths. It now becomes our task to determine how the *deus ex machina* functions as a form of visual epiphany in an attempt to give back some religious fertility to the machine.

Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood made the beginnings of my case almost two decades ago when she explained that, in the eyes of the ancient audience, *apo mēchanēs* deities were not empty structural devices of closure or literary creations, but ‘seriously perceived deities issuing serious orders, guidance, prophecies’ to the tragic characters.¹² Sourvinou-Inwood stressed the ultimate unknowability of the will of the gods in Greek religion and how epiphanies turning things around in unexpected ways was correlative to this belief.¹³ This certainly helps to explain epiphany in tragic plots, and goes some way towards reappraising the role of the *mēchanē*, but Sourvinou-Inwood’s analysis accounts neither for the visual nor for the mechanical. To assess adequately how the *mēchanē* works as a tool of mechanical epiphany in tragedy we must understand not only the role of epiphany in Greek religion in general, but also the specifically visual nature of epiphanies in Greek religion, the role of technology and of *technē* as it frames divine–human interactions, and the ability of objects to exert agency.

I begin with a brief consideration of what the *mēchanē* might have looked like and how it is likely to have functioned, practically speaking. This is important to determine how the spectator would have seen the machine working within the ‘illusion’ of the performance, and is critical to re-establish the materiality, and thus the agency, of the *mēchanē* as an object. Work on the tragic mask offers a helpful hermeneutic parallel here, and the evidence from

¹¹ Michelakis 2020, 3–4.

¹² Sourvinou-Inwood 2003 especially at 8, 292, 417–19, 461.

¹³ Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 292–3.

Part I Greek Tragedy and Mechanical Epiphany

Old Comedy, which frequently parodies the use of the *mēchanē*, affords us another way into understanding the effect of the machine on the spectators. Chapter 1 closes by analysing the *mēchanē* as a technology of religious media and granting the machine agency not only to reflect, but also to challenge existing theologies. In Chapter 2, I turn to looking at non-mechanical appearances of the gods in Greek tragedy to ascertain what was distinctive about the occasions when the *mēchanē* is used. Embedded within this discussion is an examination of other forms of visual epiphany in Greek culture in order to situate the theatrical machine within a broader cultural and religious discourse. Finally, Chapter 3 offers an analysis of the use of the *deus ex machina* in six extant tragedies, contemplating the *mēchanē in situ* to understand where mechanical epiphany fits within the broader picture of Greek visual epiphany, and within Greek ideas of the gods in general.