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What is a Greek Source on the Early English Stage? Fifteen New Essays

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi and Tania Demetriou

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Colin Burrow is a Senior Research Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford. He has written extensively on relations between early modern and classical literatures. His monographs include *Epic Romance: Homer to Milton* (Oxford University Press 1993), *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* (Oxford University Press 2013), and *Imitating Authors: Plato to Futurity* (Oxford University Press 2019). He has edited *The Complete Sonnets and Poems* for the Oxford Shakespeare (2002) and the complete poems of Ben Jonson for *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, and the poems of John Marston for *The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Marston.* He is completing the Elizabethan volume of the Oxford English Literary History.

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8

Questions of Mediation of the *Deus ex Machina* in Elizabethan Drama[*]

Emanuel Stelzer

Abstract

Whereas the *OED* dates the earliest occurrence of the phrase *deus ex machina* in the English language to 1697, the concept was quite familiar to the Elizabethans. This essay wishes to investigate how the *deus ex machina* device of Greek and Roman drama was received and mediated in the Elizabethan theatres. It will be seen that neither issues of technology required for the descent of a god on stage nor questions of genre can fully explain the paucity of examples. It will be argued that, since the Reformed context associated the *deus ex machina* with Catholicism, and the device maintained connections with medieval miracle plays, seeing pagan gods perform the *deus ex machina* function could contribute to articulating critical reflections on the Christian God's providential interventionism in human life.

Keywords: *deus ex machina*; early modern drama; Elizabethan theatre; classical reception; gods

> The *Elizabethans forced the gods into a secondary place, either as atmosphere or as simple participants on the same footing as mortals.* The gods were no longer the divine rulers of dramatic action and the secret agents of the author.
> (Hyde 1949, 87)

> Providence Stay, stay thy stroke, thou wofull Dame:
> what wilt thou thus despaire?
> (An. 1599, F4*v*)

Looking Up to the Heavens

This essay originates from the realisation that there are very few classical deities acting as a *deus ex machina* at the end of Elizabethan plays, appearing to resolve otherwise insolvable problems or settling knotty situations. A list of such plays may include: in 1582, the anonymous *Love and Fortune*; Gager's *Dido* (1583); Lyly's *Galatea* (1584);[1] the lechery episode with Mercury's intervention in the no longer extant *2 The Seven Deadly Sins* (1597); Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1600), and John Marston's *Histriomastix* (c.1600-1603).[2] This rarity becomes clearer when one considers that there are more than 150 plays from 1533 to 1603 featuring the presence of a classical god in Wiggins and Richardson's *Catalogue of British Drama*, and yet, in most cases, the deities are used as prologues or choric presenters; they are present but do not interfere apart from when they are the protagonists of their plays. With the proviso that only some of the texts catalogued by Wiggins and Richardson are actually plays (many are entertainments) and that many of them are no longer extant (and the information about them often inconclusive), nevertheless, the paucity of *dei ex machina* is undeniable. This essay wishes to investigate the reasons for their scarceness and explore the possible cultural ramifications of the mediations of this feature of classical dramaturgy in Elizabethan drama. Most studies devoted to theophanies on the early modern stage[3] focus on Jacobean plays and especially Shakespeare's romances, but, since the Stuart masques intensified and changed the use of the device for, as Fiona Macintosh and Justine McConnell put it, "the hyper-real – the world of wonder and revelation . . . is the true preserve of the masque" (2020, 90), this essay will examine the *deus ex machina* both as a concept and as a dramaturgic feature in the previous decades.

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[1] Although here it is much more a *deus ex machina* function, since Venus is an important character in the play; on the suggestions of the *deus ex machina* in Lyly's plays, see Saccio 1969, 214-18.

[2] I have omitted from this list the two following translations of classical plays produced in the Elizabethan period featuring a *deus ex machina*: John Studley's 1566 translation of *Hercules Oetaeus* (not conceived for performance, and the no longer extant *Iphigenia* by George Peele, 1582 (possibly a translation of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* with Minerva as *dea ex machina*, but more likely to be the *Iphigenia in Aulis*).

[3] On theophanies on the early modern stage, see Mason Vaughan 2019, Eager 2020, and Dixon and Garrison 2021.

One may start by considering the singular infrequency of the occurrences of the phrase *deus ex machina* in early modern texts. When searching for it on the *EEBO* database (which collects English texts printed between 1473 and 1700), a user may be surprised to find only two occurrences. Both appear in passages of quite late, devotional tracts, which comment on David's unhoped-for[4] escape from Saul's army in 1 Sam. 23:27-8. The first occurs in the 1680 work of an Irish clergyman, James Wood, *Sheperdy Spiritualiz'd*: "This was *Deus ex Machinâ,* God appearing seasonably" (34).[5] The other is an excerpt from Christopher Ness's 1696 *A Complete History and Mystery of the Old and New Testament*: "There was [*Deus ex Machinâ*] *God* coming to the relief of his Servant (as it were) out of an Engine" (186). The *OED* dates the earliest occurrence of the phrase also quite late, to 1697,[6] a passage in John Sergeant's *Solid Philosophy Asserted*, responding to Locke's empiricism: "it is an odd kind of Argument, to alledge, that it is not impossible to conceive that God may do this [i.e. annexing certain ideas to certain motions] . . . Nor is it at all allowable in Philosophy, to bring in a *Deus è Machinâ* at every turn, when our selves are at a loss to give a Reason for our Thesis" (136). It may be no coincidence that all these three examples tread potentially dangerous ground, mixing the language of theology with that of drama.

Does the lateness of these occurrences mean that the Elizabethans did not know what a *deus ex machina* is? No, as shall be seen shortly, but such late dates *are* strange,[7] considering that anyone interested in early modern drama knows (or thinks they know – see next section) that it was possible to have someone descend on the stage from the ceiling of the playhouses, aptly called 'the heavens':

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[4] The marginal gloss of the Geneva Bible to the passage reads: "Thus the Lord can pull back the bridle of the tyrants and deliver his out of the lion's mouth".

[5] Contrast Wood's certainty with Erasmus' tentative wish that God may put an end to the wars of religion, expressed many decades earlier in a letter to the Archbishop of Cologne, sent on 18 March 1528: "For nothing can be really prosperous or truly happy in human affairs unless that which Christ worked in us . . . unless some divine intervention, like a *deus ex machina*, suddenly appearing on the scene, bring about some unexpected exit to this stormy tragedy" (qtd in Murray 1920, 293). Interestingly, Erasmus' wished-for providential *deus ex machina* would perform a miracle by converting hearts, from the inside, not by performing prodigies in the outer world.

[6] The *OED* records the first uses of the phrase "god from" or "out of the machine" (*s.v.* "god", n.) also quite late, dating them to the second half of the seventeenth century.

> 1611 Randle Cotgrave *Dictionary of the French and English Tongues*: *s.v. Volerie*: a place ouer a stage which we call the Heauen.
>
> 1612 Thomas Heywood *An Apology for Actors*: . . . the couerings of the stage, which wee call the heauens (where vpon any occasion their Gods descended) were Geometrically supported by a Giant-like Atlas. (D2*v*)

In this passage, Heywood is describing the roof of an "Amphitheatre" built by Caesar in Campus Martius (probably confusing the Amphitheatre of Statilius Taurus – about which we, like the early moderns, know very little – with the Theatre of Marcellus, planned by Caesar and built under Augustus). Heywood's words have been interpreted to suggest that "he thought the Roman and English roofs were identical, or at least fulfilled identical functions" (Graves 2009, 38). Heywood goes on and refers to the planets and signs of the zodiac ideally depicted there (which graced the ceilings of Elizabethan and Jacobean playhouses): "in that little compasse were comprehended the perfect modell of the firmament, the whole frames of the heauens" (D3*r*). We are not sure where Heywood got this information: Vitruvius devoted a whole book of his *De Architectura* (first printed at the end of the fifteenth century) to the applications of astronomy to architecture, but never states that the roofs of Roman theatres were painted with stars and planets, nor do we have any detailed description of the *theologeion*, the raised platform from which the gods spoke in Greek theatres (Julius Pollux simply writes: ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ θεολογείου ὄντος ὑπὲρ τὴν σκηνὴν ἐν ὕψει ἐπιφαίνονται θεοί, 4.130; "From the *theologeion*, which is higher than the stage, the gods appear", Jouanna 2018, 236). The *theologeion* was a part of the theatre structure which did not coincide with the tier from which the *mēkhanē* would operate, that is the crane which would allow the actors playing gods and goddesses to descend on the stage and re-ascend.[8] What Heywood knew is that "the *Romanes* had their first patterne" (D2*v*) from the Greek theatres, and he insisted that the antiquity of his profession could help vindicating it against the Puritans' attacks.

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[7] A word of caution must be added: *EEBO* does not recognise Greek characters; if *ex machina* is spelt in Greek alphabet, the database does not identify those occurrences – see Barlow's 1601 text below.

Heywood wrote his *Apology for Actors* in the 1610s, so he may have had the chance to see the theophanies of the court masques as well as the versions offered by his colleagues (like Jupiter's descent on an eagle in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*). He was also "the longest serving professional dramatist of the time" (Amelang 2023, n.n.) and a couple of his plays made important use of the flying equipment provided by the theatres in which he worked (see next section). Thus, his use of the past tense (the gods "descended") should not be interpreted as meaning that the *deus ex machina* was just something that happened in antiquity. His comment is telling also in that he writes that actors playing the role of gods descended from the top of the stage "vpon any occasion" – which seems to imply that they would descend at their pleasure and discretion, not performing a precise dramaturgical function in specific dramatic situations. This detail invites us to reflect on the history of criticism on the purpose and value of the *deus ex machina*[9] and how such critical ideas were developed in the Renaissance.

How can we account for the rarity of the phrase in early modern English, considering that it is well attested in books published on the Continent? One explanation is that the phrase, while proverbial, was not at all the only way to express the concept. The phrase is a Latin calque of the Greek ἀπὸ μηχανῆς θεός, although Aristotle never employs that exact phrase. In a seminal passage for the critical history of the device, he uses it in reference to Medea's escape in Euripides' play and to the incident of the embarkation Book 2 of *The Iliad*: φανερὸν οὖν ὅτι καὶ τὰς λύσεις τῶν μύθων ἐξ αὐτοῦ δεῖ τοῦ μύθου συμβαίνειν, ἐν τῇ Μηδείᾳ ἀπὸ μηχανῆς καὶ ἐν τῇ Ἰλιάδι τὰ περὶ τὸν ἀπόπλουν (*Poetics* 1454a-b; “Clearly, the explication of a story should issue from the story itself, and not *ex machina* as in the *Medea*, or in the departure scene in the *Iliad*”, Kenny 2013, 35 [adapted]).[10] This is how Theodore Goulston translated into Latin Aristotle’s allusion to Medea’s means of escape in 1623: “Solaris vehiculo auxilio” (35), literally, by the aid of the sun vehicle. Moreover, whereas one of Erasmus’s *Adagia* was consistently indexed as “*deus ex machina*”, the header of the adage is “Deus ex improuiso apparens” (1550, 58-9), a god appearing all of a sudden, out of the blue. This adage became very influential. In the quotations from Plato,[11] Lucian, Euripides, and Athenaeus which Erasmus comments on, ἀπὸ or ἐκ μηχανῆς is occasionally rendered literally (“ad machinas confugiunt deos sustollentes”, they resort to the machines to lift the gods; “Quemadmodum in tragoedia machinam tollens”, as operating a machine in a tragedy; “e machina ritu deum”, from a machine in the manner of the gods), but in most cases it is the suddenness of the apparition that is emphasised: “deus ex improviso ostensus” (a god shown all of a sudden), “deum de repente exortum” (a god who has come forth suddenly), “deum repente apparentem” (a god appearing unexpectedly). Thus, the *deus ex machina* phrase was not the only way to express the notion both in Latin and in English (for some examples of the latter, see below), while it was Horace’s dictum that arguably had the most impact, given the Roman poet’s prestige in the early modern period:

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[8] It has been argued that the Roman theatres had a configuration of wings "less conducive to *deus ex machina* and other conventions of the Greek stage" (Harrison 2000, 141), but it is highly unlikely that this difference was known in the early modern period. On the uses of the crane in Attic comedy and tragedy, see Mastronarde 1990.

[9] See the still fundamental study by Andreas Spira 1960.

[10] See Castelvetro’s clarification: “Aristotele per queste parole ἀπὸ μηχανῆς non si ristringe all’apparitione della persona di dio solamente, ma intende generalmente dell’apparitioni di tutte quelle cose che miracolosamente per ordigno sono fatte di subito contra natura comparere in palco” (1570, 186*v*; “Aristotle with these words, ἀπὸ μηχανῆς, does not limit the apparition to be merely that of the god’s person; he means, more in general, the apparitions of all those things which are miraculously, by means of a device, suddenly and against nature, made visible on the stage”). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

[11] This is the relevant passage in Plato’s *Cratylus*: εἰ μὴ ἄρα βούλει, ὥσπερ οἱ τραγῳδοποιοὶ ἐπειδάν τι ἀπορῶσιν ἐπὶ τὰς μηχανὰς καταφεύγουσι θεοὺς αἴροντες (425d; “unless you think we had better follow the example of the tragic poets, who, when they are in a dilemma, have recourse to the introduction of gods on machines”, Fowler 1921, 143).

"Nec deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus inciderit" (*Ars Poetica*, 190-1), rendered by Thomas Drant in 1567 as "God must be none brought on the stage, but in such case and tyme, / When mortall man, cannot reforme nor dignely plage the cryme" (A6*v*) and by Ben Jonson as "nor [must the fable be] lay'd / To have a god come in; except a knot / Worth his untying happen there" (1640, 12).[12]

We will return to the use of such phrases in religious discourse which, I shall argue, had an impact on the theatre of the age. Although the present essay is interested more in the *deus ex machina* function performed by gods in Elizabethan drama than in the physical conditions of staging the device, a technological premise is necessary, because some scholars have argued that there were few *dei ex machina* purely due to the difficulty in managing the actual descent or ascent of divine characters in the playhouses. For instance, T. J. King observes that only five plays of the period call for actors and/or large properties to ascend or descend, suggesting that "machinery was not *required* in the vast majority of plays, which suggests that it was also not available in the vast majority of playhouses" (1971, 148).

The Technology Required

Continental Renaissance plays, pageants and entertainments made much of divine manifestations through machinery. One can feel Sebastiano Serlio's pride when he writes that "con l'artificio a qualche buon proposito si vedera descẽdere alcun'Dio dal Cielo: correre qualche Pianeta per l'aria" (1545, 71*v*; "With like skill gods are made to descend from the skies and planets to pass through the air", Hewitt 1958, 24-5). The *Hôtel de Bourgogne*, the first permanent theatre in Paris, built in 1548, had a higher stage purposefully designed for special effects and angelic descents (see Wiley 1973, 85-6). In England, the quality of the technology required for divine ascents and descents must have presented some limitations at least until the 1590s, as is suggested by a stage direction at the end of Robert Greene's *Alphonsus of Aragon*, performed probably by the Queen Elizabeth's Men c.1587: "*Exit Venus. Or if you can conueniently, let a chaire come downe from the top of the stage, and draw her vp*" (1599, I3*r*). However, one can contrast the hesitancy conveyed by this stage direction with the words of the Presenter in George Peele's virtually contemporary *The Battle of Alcazar* (c.1588-1589) who matter-of-factly describes Fame's appearance in a dumb show: "At last descendeth Fame as Iris . . . Fame from her stately bower doth descend" (1594, E4*v*-F1*r*). Recently, views such as John Astington's statement that "The *deus ex machina* was popular enough and the essential machinery that drove it cheap enough for it to have been standard equipment in any permanent playhouse" (1985, 130), and Cyril Walter Hodges' observation that the *deus ex machina* constituted "a constant pleasure to Elizabethan audiences" (1973, 84) have been severely questioned by David Mann's reassessment. As he puts it: "Where there's a canopy, so most popular academic studies suppose, there must be a winch; its absence offends a sense of the Globe as cosmos" (2013, 189), but "until 1613 evidence of outdoor flying is extremely rare" (184). Mann concedes that flying was "relatively commonplace" in "street pageants . . . in indoor drama . . . and, perhaps, in academic drama and in professional drama at the English court", but he lists three criteria that made the use of flying equipment rare in the Elizabethan playhouses: the cost of installing and managing it; playacting conventions dictating "fast-moving dramas . . . largely indifferent to mechanical means" (190), and the theatre configuration: unlike in the private theatres, "in outdoor theaters flying was an altogether more hazardous operation" (ibid.).

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[12] Jonson completed the first version of his translation in 1604 but revised it sometimes after 1610; it was first published posthumously (see Brock and Palacas 2016, 24-5).

Until 1595, when Henslowe noted on 4 June the money spent for "mackinge the throne In the heuenes" (2002, 7) at the Rose, "a simple hoist from the highest part of the tiring house" may have been used in various performing spaces (Orrell 1988, 65) – perhaps the solution used for "*Cupide com*[*ing*] *downe from heauen*", as the stage direction in the manuscript reads (qtd in Mann 2013, 203n69) at the beginning of *Gismund of Salerne* (probably performed in 1568 at Greenwich). This descent was a deliberate choice of the dramatist and/or of the acting company, since the source, the prologue of

Lodovico Dolce's *Didone* (channelling here Book 1 of *The Aeneid*),[13] does not necessarily call for Cupid to descend: the stage direction of the Italian text simply reads "CVPIDO IN FORMA DI ASCANIO" (Dolce 1560, Aiii*r*; "Cupid disguised as Ascanius"). Mann argues that Heywood's *Silver Age* (published in 1613 but, according to him, identifiable with the *1&2 Hercules* performed in 1595 at the Rose), a play which has several deities ascending and descending (by way of a combination of flying equipment, movements from the galleries to the stage, and perhaps the use of an external staircase) was an "isolated experiment" (2013, 196) which "discouraged the Chamberlain's Men from installing a throne at the Globe" because of the sheer "logistical" problems descents presented (197).[14] Elizabeth E. Tavares concurs in her article on the development of the heavens in Elizabethan playhouses: "The evolution of the Heavens – comprised of a roof over the stage, attendant pillars, and a pulley system to suspend props, scenery, and actors – indicates that it was not a feature in the initial construction of these first-generation playhouses" (2016, 195). More drastically, it has been stated that "it is a serious question whether the Globe that Shakespeare used had descent machinery at all" (Dutton 2018, n. p.); as far as the Chamberlain/King's Men are concerned, since "[t]here are few 'heavenly' entrances, and all in late plays . . . [this] may suggest that only Shakespeare's last theatre, Blackfriars, had a mechanism for a descending 'heavenly' chair" (Stern 2013, 19). By then, of course, many of the Stuart masques ended with the spectacular descent of mythological or mythologised characters from painted clouds, and it has been established that Jacobean plays offered a "populuxe"[15] version of such courtly conventions in the public and private playhouses. Roy Booth notices the irony of Ben Jonson's indictment of the flying equipment at the professional theatres used to make spectators gape in admiration, proudly asserting that in his comedy "N[o] creaking throne comes down, the boyes to please" (*Every Man in His Humour*, Prologue of the 1616 folio, 16):[16] "this from the man who wrote more words to accompany masques with their aerial machines than any other poet of the period" (2007, n.n.).

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[13] On Dolce's *Didone* as a source of *Gismund*, see Cunliffe 1912, lxxxvi-xc.

[14] Of course, the stagecraft involved in productions of *1&2 Hercules*/*The Silver Age* may have changed over the years. For a critique of Mann's assessment regarding the equipment of the heavens with winching machinery at the Red Bull, where Heywood's *Ages* were performed in the Jacobean period, see Griffith 2013, 103 and Preedy 2022, 253-5.

[15] On this concept, see Dawson and Yachnin 2001, 40 and 56.

The present essay does not aim at arguing that the technical quality of machinery was better than supposed by these scholars, although there is, as Matthew Steggle argues, "copious evidence which suggests that roped flying technology was available to early modern theatres" before the Jacobean period (2022, 15), the early modern version of the Greek *aorai*, ropes "hung down to raise up heroes and gods into the air" mentioned by Pollux (Beacham 1991, 182). The *deus ex machina* function (unlike the device *per se*) can be enacted with the sudden appearance of the deity no matter how it is staged from a proxemic point of view although, for instance, vertical and horizontal movements are essential to convey different hierarchical configurations (not to forget music, costumes, special lighting effects, etc.). We can think of Venus' intervention in the final act of John Lyly's *Galatea* (1587-1588) when she promises to alter the sex of either Galatea or Phillida, or Hymen mysteriously officiating the weddings in *As You Like It* (1599). On the other hand, it can be argued that the experience of seeing a *dramatis persona* vertically descend or ascend must not have been rare: although "great wondering" (qtd in Steggle 2007, 54) greeted the Scarabeus flying up to Jupiter's palace thanks to John Dee's artistry in the 1547 Trinity College, Cambridge production of Aristophanes' *Pax*, which earned Dee the suspicion of resorting to some devilish magic, we have to remember that miracle plays had often regaled their audiences with such feats (see e.g. the stage direction "Hic descendunt nubes, Pater in nube" for the Transfiguration episode of the York Cycle, qtd in Young 1959, 98; "here clouds descend, with God the Father in the cloud"), and, in general, God, his angels and the saints would often appear from above in medieval theatre.[17]

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[16] William Cartwright in his eulogy extolled Jonson also because of his refusal to employ a *deus ex machina*: "*Thou* alwayes dost *unty*, not *cut* the *knot* / . . . / No *power* comes down with learned *hat* and *rod*, / *Wit* onely, and *contrivance* is *thy god*" (Craig 1990, 195).

[17] On the technical requirements as well as shortcomings of these medieval performances of flying, see Young 1959, 93-116.

Tudor street pageants would also present characters ascending and descending: see, for instance, the Holy Virgin "commyng from hevin" (Raine 1890, 57) saluting Henry VII on his first visit to York in 1486 and "ascend ayane" amidst a staged snowfall made of crushed "waffrons" (i.e. wafers). More rarely, university plays would also include *dei ex machina*: among the spectacular effects of Gager's *Dido* (performed in Christ Church, Oxford, in June 1583) which were remembered by the audience, there were "Mercurie and Iris descending and ascending from and to an high place" (Holinshed 1587, 1355).[18] Iris, in particular, arrives at the end of the play (5.4) to fulfil Juno's command and let Dido die rapidly. Her words (a paraphrase of *Aeneid* 4.693-705) have a divine performativity:

> Thaumante genita principis venio deae
> Ministra. Fatum implere mandatur tuum,
> Moramque mortis tollere urgentis prope.
> En hos capillos iussa Plutoni sacros
> Dicabo, teque corpore exolvam tuo.
> (Sutton 2005, 1170-4)

> [I, daughter of Thaumas, am come, as servant to the Queen of the Gods. The command is given to fulfil your fate, and halt the delay to your impending death. Behold, as instructed, I consecrate this lock of hair, now sacred to Pluto, and free you from your body.
> (Sandis 2023, n.n.)]

Reception and Cultural Connotations of the *Deus ex Machina*

What did the early modern English actually know about the *deus ex machina* of Greek and Roman theatre? The most influential classical tragedian was Seneca, read in Latin and/or in the Tudor translations collected in the *Tenne Tragedies* published in 1581, not conceived for performance (although *Oedipus* was probably staged at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1559-1560); and Seneca never employs the

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[18] On the *dei ex machina* in this play, Glynne Wickham comments: "Mercury and Iris may have been comparatively new inhabitants of cloud-machines, but the machine itself had been in use on the English stage for over two hundred years" (1959, 264).

deus ex machina. The only partial exception is the conclusion of *Hercules Oetaeus* (now believed to be spurious) where, after his death on the pyre, Hercules appears in divine form to reassure his mother and friends that he is off to take his seat among the other gods in compensation of his virtue – but Hercules here can be called a *deus ex machina* only in the broadest sense, since he is the protagonist of the tragedy. The lack of a *deus ex machina* in Seneca[19] has often been interpreted as perfectly in line with his tragic vision which "admits no escape from evil, no defense against the mindless brutality of fate" (Slavitt 1995, xlii). He goes so far as to get rid of Artemis at the end of Euripides' *Hippolytus Stephanophoros*: "He gave a revision of the goddess' role to Phaedra . . . who, by delaying her suicide, reveals to Theseus what only Artemis could after her death" (Calder 1983, 191). But even if Seneca chose not to employ the *deus ex machina*, early modern readers could encounter this device in other classical plays. They could read the plays of Euripides (the Greek dramatist who made most use of the device) in the numerous Greek editions and Latin translations circulating across Europe; they would be familiar with Jupiter's final appearance from above in Plautus' *Amphitruo*, and they would find references to the *deus ex machina* in passages such as those above-mentioned in Horace's *Ars Poetica* and Erasmus' *Adagia*.

Continental critics theorised about it: for example, Scaliger compared Athena's speech at the end of the *Odyssey* to a *deus ex machina* – "interuenit *θεός ἀπὸ μηχανῆς*: quod Tragœdiæ proprium est" (1586, 26, "a *deus ex machina* intervenes, which pertains to tragedy"). This judgment is not neutral: it means that, for Scaliger, a *deus ex machina* is not necessarily something a tragedian should be ashamed of. Instead, André de Rivaudeau, in the preface to his *Aman, tragédie sainte* (1561) justifies himself for not employing a *deus ex machina* on the grounds of what Aristotle had written on its implausibility:

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[19] It has even been suggested that the enraged Juno in the prologue of *Hercules Furens* does not need to descend on the stage: banished from heaven due to Jupiter's affairs with other women, she "may stand on the same stage level as the human characters, in order to represent [her] residence on earth" (Bernstein 2017, 97).

> Un moindre vice est de ce qu'ils appellent les Machines, c'est à dire, les moyens extraordinaires et surnaturelz pour deslier le nœud de la Tragedie, un Dieu fableux en campagne, un chariot porté par Dragons en l'air, et mille autres grossieres subtilitez, sans lesquelles les poëtes mal fournis d'inventions, ou d'art ou meprisans ce dernier, ne peuvent venir à bout de leur fusée, ni depestrer le nœud Gordien, sinon de la façon du grand Alexandre, à coupz de baston. Aristote marque ceste faute en la Medée, et je l'ay cottée en Electre avec d'autres. Or il ne faut imiter leur licencieuse façon que nous pouvons blasmer comme Horace tenaille franchement celle de Plaute en son *Art Poëtique* . . . (1969, 54)
>
> [A less serious fault is the use of what are called 'machines', that is to say, extraordinary and supernatural means of bring about the dénouement of a tragedy – a fabulous deity who intervenes, a chariot transported through the sky by a dragon and innumerable other crude devices without which poets with few ideas and scant familiarity with their art, or even despising it, cannot unravel their plots or untie the Gordian knot except, like Alexander the Great, by using brute force. Aristotle notes this weakness in *Medea*, and I, like others, have found it in *Electra*. Now, we must not imitate their departures from what is correct. Rather we should condemn them, just like Horace who excoriates the deficiencies of Plautus in his *Art of Poetry*. (Howarth 1997, 33-4)]

The view of the *deus ex machina* as a shibboleth to recognise unskilled dramatists (which does not correspond with what is argued by Aristotle and Horace) was voiced by various early modern scholars. Giraldi Cinzio, in his discourse *Intorno al Comporre delle Comedie, et delle Tragedie* (1554), examines what Horatian "knots" may necessitate the intervention of a god for their solution. Following Aristotle, Cinzio contrasts the role of Athena in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* and in the *Ion*, and reflects:

> *Ma nella sconueneuolezza non incorrera* il Poeta , se egli non si appigliera a fauola (sia ella o Comica, o Tragica) che non possa esser menata al fine dal suo giudicio, & dalla uirtu dello ingegno suo, *& non da interuenimento d'Iddio, da pouertà*, o d'ingegno, o di giudicio introdottoui per inueuitable necessita . . . Et tra quelle, che sono di marauigliosa testura, & di lodeuolissima solutione, quelle

> sono eccellenti, che dall'ingegno del Poeta sono menate al giusto fine, senza mutatione di persone, & senza intervento di diuin'opra. (Giraldi Cinzio 1554, 113)
>
> [But the poet will not be inappropriate, if he does not rely on a plot (be it either comic, or tragic) which cannot be brought to the end by his judgment, and by the virtue of his wit, and not by God's intervention, by poverty, or wit, or judgment introduced by inevitable necessity . . . And among those which are of marvellous texture, and of very commendable solution, those are excellent, which by the wit of the poet are brought to the right end, without mutation of persons, and without any divine intervention.]

It is probable that Daniel Heinsius had this passage of Cinzio in mind when, in his 1611 *De Tragoediae Constitutione* (parts of which were borrowed by Jonson in the *Discoveries*), while discussing the ending of Plautus' *Amphitruo*, he states that the *deus ex machina* "est ultimum refugium Poetae, cum τὴν δέσιν, hoc est, nodum, quem ligavit ipse, solvere potest, & rem parum provide tractavit" (Hardin 2007, 51n67; "is always the Poet's last refuge, since he cannot untie the knot he has tied, a matter he has handled with too little foresight", 42).

Thus, scholars on the Continent recognised the *deus ex machina* as a dramaturgical device used by the Greeks and Romans in both tragedies and comedies, and reflected, largely negatively, on its appropriateness on the grounds of its place in the organisation of the plot. Moreover, the *deus ex machina* was discussed in the context of the debate over the genre of tragicomedy in the second half of the sixteenth century. Guarini believed that the most important part of a tragicomedy was the fifth act, when all the "knots" should be untied under the principle of verisimilitude: being able to conclude the play properly constitutes "il maggior neruo dell'artifizio dramatico" (Guarini 1601, 59; "the chiefest nerve of the dramatic artifice") – a proper tragicomic ending is paramount "come nel capo risiede lo intelletto dell'uomo" (ibid., as it is in the head where man's intellect resides).[20] Hence the interest of the period in Euripides' tragedies

[20] It has been suggested that the untying of the knots in a Guarinian tragicomedy is carefully planned according to the tenets of Counter-

with a happy ending: "Euripides offered an authoritative classical model for legitimising the controversial genre of tragicomedy" (Pollard 2017, 180).

It is evident that such critical views on the *deus ex machina* were generally of the kind that would be overturned only in the twentieth century, with the reappraisal of Euripides' use of the device, discovering its integral function in the play in order to solve an otherwise insolvable human *Grenzsituation* (limit-situation, Spira 1960, 27),[21] and its definition as "a very rare beauty", allowing "mortal emotion" to "brea[k] against the cliffs of immortal calm" (Murray 1913, 225, 223).

One wonders whether some of the Elizabethan professional dramatists came into contact with this body of continental criticism concerning the device. As often happens with classical reception in early modern England, we do not have any equivalent theorisation on the *deus ex machina*, and it is well known that the reception of Aristotle's *Poetics*, in particular, was a very complex and nuanced phenomenon (see Orgel 2002, 129-42, and Dewar-Watson 2018). It seems likely that some Elizabethan playwrights, besides reading Plautus and/or Euripides, encountered discussions of the *deus ex machina* in other types of texts, such as compendia referring to Horace's famous "Nec deus intersit", Erasmus's adage, or the following, influential excerpt from the first book of Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*. Here, the Epicurean Velleius compares beliefs in divine providence to the incompetence of dramatists resorting to a *deus ex machina*: "Quod quia quem ad modum natura efficere sine aliqua mente possit non videtis, ut tragici poetae cum explicare argumenti exitum non potestis confugitis ad deum" ("You on the contrary cannot see how nature can achieve all this without the aid

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Reformation which aimed at unifying reason and God's mercy (following God's "generous and very rational project of salvation in which the very design of the dramatist can be seen with clearer transparency", D'Angelo 2000, 110, translation mine).

[21] Consider also the epistemological function of the Euripidean *deus ex machina*: "The words of the god allow human beings to see as scales fall from their eyes. They come to realise – but not via discursive thinking or the information of a fact, via instead a sudden transposition onto the level of the god" (Spira 1960, 156, translation mine).

of some intelligence, and so, like the tragic poets, being unable to bring the plot of your drama to a *dénouement*, you have recourse to a god", Rackham 1933, 52-3).

A question that should not be underestimated is precisely the identity of the agents of the original *deus ex machina*: the gods. The device "demands the audience's perceptual investment in the possibility that a human actor can transcend mortality and become a god" (Dixon and Garrison 2021, 20). Interestingly, Cicero's passage was translated and used by John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury, in a tract written as a reply to a Catholic controversialist, Thomas Harding. Jewel attacks the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation and writes that even schoolboys learn that accidents have no being without a substance and thus it follows that Harding is wrong to say that, since God is omnipotent, "Accidentes in the Sacrament stande without Subiecte" (1565, 438). "[For] Cicero saith: *A simple Poete, when he cannot tel, howe to shifte his maters, imagineth some God suddainely to come in place a litle to astonne the people: and there an ende*' (437). Gone is the explicit reference to theatre (in favour of poetry, in general), but, more importantly, also gone is the semi-atheism of the Epicurean speaker in Cicero's text. What Jewel achieves is a daring transposition of the artificiality of a dramaturgic device onto the sphere of metaphysics to negate Catholic belief. This is one of the earliest texts which associate the *deus ex machina* with popery – an association which would become significantly widespread over the next years. Among Protestants, it had become common to consider Catholics as idolaters worse than the heathens who did not know Christ, and it can be argued that the *deus ex machina* became a shorthand to censure popish idolatry.

It is well known that among the effects of the gradual and state-imposed secularisation of Reformed English drama there was the replacement of the miracle plays with stories from classical mythology: "the divine presence most often incarnate on the early modern English stage was not Protestant or Catholic, but pagan" (Taylor 2001, 14). Both plays featuring saints and those featuring the pagan gods disgusted Puritan antitheatricalists who saw drama as the ideal vehicle of idolatry and its manifestation as popery. Just invoking the gods' names was considered idolatry by Stephen Gosson: "Setting out the stage plays of the Gentiles, so we worship that we stoop to the names of heathen idols" (Pollard 2004, 98). And yet, as well discussed by Alison Shell:

> Even at their most paranoid, antitheatricalists do not seem to be implying that such an auditor [i.e. an unlettered apprentice] would actually go away from the theatre believing in pagan gods. What they fear is, rather, the temporary imaginative collusion of auditor with actor . . . In essence, this is a suspicion of – to use an anachronistic term – performativity. (2010, 51)

If this was the feared effect of the names of the gods pronounced in the playhouse, it may be argued that seeing gods perform the *deus ex machina* function risked paving the way to general as well as potentially sceptical reflections on the Christian God's interventionism or non-interventionism in this earthly life. On the surface, a *deus ex machina* is a rebuttal of Epicurean views of deities uninterested in us: a god untying the knots at the end of a play is the opposite of a "Pagan Idol, void of power and pietie, / A sleeping Dormouse (rather) a dead Deitie" (Du Bartas 2012, 297). But the artificiality of the intervention of a *deus ex machina* in the theatre could feel particularly offensive in a Reformed context, especially from a Calvinist perspective, where "providence is described generally as 'concealed' (*occulta*), and the movement of God's hand as 'secret' (*secreta*). Calvin expressly distinguished between the 'mysteries' of revelation from the 'abyss' of God's hidden will at work in the government of the universe" (Gerrish 1973, 282). Significantly, in the aforementioned *De Tragoediae Constitutione*, Heinsius (who was "embedded within the system of Dutch Calvinism", van Miert 2018, n.n.) would attempt "a detailed treatment of causality and agency in which poetics . . . emerges as a privileged site for thinking about probability and necessity, nature, and the terms and limits of human knowledge, directly relevant to contemporary theological debates" (Leo 2019, 167). The *deus ex machina* troubled Heinsius because, as Russ Leo suggests:

> a tragedy is an object lesson in immanent causality. The *deus ex machina* . . . violates this principle insofar as it introduces an element that is otherwise foreign to the unity or totality of action in the tragedy, and thus introduces a miraculous end that does

> not follow necessarily from the totality of events and affects that otherwise constitute the work. (248)

The Elizabethan texts which refer, more or less obliquely, to the *deus ex machina* can help explain why the phrase first came to occur in English in those devotional texts where God's Providence is articulated as an artificial *deus ex machina*, which riskily mixes what is believed to be true (the Christian faith) with the sphere of dramatic mimesis.[22]

Let us contrast the complexities which arise from Heinsius' philosophical interpretation of tragedy with the portrayal of Providence personified in the popular romance *Clyomon and Clamydes* (An. 1599), which has been aptly called "a *deus ex machina* in plain sight" (Knapp 2000, 124). She descends "from seate of mightie Ioue" (F4*v*) in the nick of time to prevent Princess Neronis' suicide. She reveals that Neronis' beloved knight is still alive, which prompts the princess to exalt the gods' bounty: "And for their prouidence diuine, the Gods aboue ile praise, / And shew their works so wonderfull, vnto their laud alwaies" (ibid.). In this type of English plays, which were written "in the manner of the miracles" (Salingar 1974, 59), divine providence has definitely a far more simplistic aspect to it. Heinsius would have excoriated Providence's function as well as most features of *Clyomon and Clamydes*,[23] nor would he have appreciated, perhaps, the "highe mistery" (Warwick Bond and Greg 1911, 3) promised by the Prologus Laureatus of *The Birth of Hercules* (possible dates: c.1600-1610) (see Smith 1988, 164-

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[22] See also Abraham Hartwell's wish that God operated like a *deus ex machina* and intervene against the Turks: "we see . . . the power of the Turkes growe so huge and infinite . . . that vnlesse God come downe as it were out an Engine . . . I feare greatly that the halfe Moone . . . will grow to the full" (1595, A3*v*).

[23] A very similar play is *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune*, the last act of which "though only about 300 lines in duration, stages three gods and two separate interventions into human action within about 120 lines of each other" (Seagar 2020, 52), In their competition in *The Rare Triumphs*, Venus and Fortune interfere with the humans to finally reveal hidden truths, quite literally stopping the action ("*Phizantius* stay, and vnto vs giue eare, / What thou determinest perfourmed cannot be" (An. 1589, G3*r*), and make peace between the characters possible.

8), modelled on *Amphitruo*. At the end of the play, Jupiter's voice thunders in the midst of a heavenly choir, announcing that the child born from Alcmena will be Hercules, with borrowings from Luke 1:30-3, tracing a not altogether original, but here a quite heavy-handed allegorical parallelism between Hercules and Christ. The atmosphere evoked in both plays feels more medieval than the product of a humanist, Reformed episteme.

Over and over again, Protestants associated Catholic beliefs with the *deus ex machina*. In 1601, William Barlow, who in few years would become Bishop of Rochester and of Lincoln, wrote that the Catholics' reliance on the Pope is also, effectively, a *deus ex machina*: "ϑεός ἀπὸ μηχανῆς (according to the Prouerbe) too Poetlike, who, when in their Tragedies they are come to an exigent, which they cannot extricate, they haue a God in an engine, whome they turne downe with a deuice to make vp the matter" (52). Protestants must remember that one can rely "vpon the Rocke which is Christ & his doctrine" (50) and adhere to *sola Scriptura* and *solus Christus*, and not be deceived by the Papists' *deus ex machina*. Barlow exploited this comparison in a later text, published in 1609, this time attacking the Jesuits' notorious defence of mental equivocation, and this time he refers to both Horace and Cicero (the knot referred to is the Catholics' ethical conundrum over taking the Oath of Allegiance):

> *This* being a knot – *Vindice dignus,* which the *Epistler* [i.e. the Jesuit Robert Parsons] cannot tell hastily how to vnloose; therefore as the *Orator* [i.e. Cicero] notes of *Poets* in their *Tragedies,* that being driuen to an exigent, they will haue *Deum ex improuiso,* some God in an Engine, which must giue them a *list*, and helpe them out cleanly. (1609, 311)

Even more revealingly, decades later, another theologian, the Arminian Thomas Jackson (d. 1640), would translate Horace's lines mockingly against Papists. Jackson states that Catholics believe that the Pope is infallible over questions that "are brought unto him, not in the discovery or finding out of such, as breed Contention" (1653, 274; i.e. he does not have a prophetic power to pre-empt such contentions), and comments:

> The exercise of this *Dominus Deus vester* plenary power is much like the use of the Heathen Gods upon the old Roman Stage.
>
> *Nec Deus intersit, nisi nodus vindice dignus*
> *Inciderit –*
> *Unless it be to loose some Gordian knot,*
> *The Popes decision is not eas'ly got.*

Again, Catholic faith is described as a wilful dependence on something epistemologically false, ontologically fake, and dramaturgically simplistic: a *deus ex machina*. For these Protestant divines, God is much more a *deus absconditus* who does not act like clockwork but moves in mysterious ways.[24] For Calvinists in particular, God's "judgments of election and reprobation [are] already determined, beyond the reach of human reason or experience" (Elton 1968, 9).

Only very rarely is the *deus ex machina* connoted positively. On entering St Andrews on 11 July 1617, King James was saluted with the words: "hic Deorum manus, divina virgula, Deus e machina apparuisti" (Adamson 1618, 164, "you appeared here, hand of the gods, divine wand, *deus ex machina*"), but the metaphor had by then acquired risky connotations. For example, George Buchanan had employed it in reference to James' mother forbidding "hir pretty venereous pigioun [i.e. Lord Bothwell] to do battaile": "the Quene, as it weir some God out of a ginne in a tragedie, had by hir aucthoritie taken vp the mattir" (1571, Iii*r*). A "god out of a gin" could resolve a situation, but it had become a symbol of popish arrogance and falsehood: in Buchanan's words, Mary Stuart, the figurehead for disaffected Catholics, acts not like a saint, but proudly wishes she could alter reality as if she were a deity in a play (which would soon turn tragic for her in real life).

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[24] It could happen instead that he should choose such a device to test us. Roger Gostwick, a Devonshire minister, claimed, for instance, that God can use the devil as a *deus ex machina*: "So that as the Poets in inextricable exigencies, do bring down Iupiter vpon the stage, ἀπὸ μηχανῆς, by a deuise or engine, so doth God in matters that passe the ordinarie pitch, bring in Sathan to shew the transcendencie of the fault" (1616, 16-17). "Do bring down": notice the present tense.

Divine Rescue at the End

> HYMEN Peace, ho. I bar confusion.
> 'Tis I must make conclusion
> Of these most strange events.
> (*As You Like It*, 5.4.123-5)

After considering the cultural connotations of the *deus ex machina* in England, we can revisit the question of its mediations in Elizabethan drama. We have seen that the rarity of pagan gods as *dei ex machina* in Elizabethan drama cannot be fully explained by technological limitations, nor, for that matter, by problems of genre: in the context of rampant 'mongrel tragicomedy' critiqued by Sidney and of *Cambyses* being a *Lamentable Tragedy Mixed Full of Pleasant Mirth*, audiences and readers would not have necessarily frowned to find a tragedy ending with a happy conclusion. And yet, in Elizabethan play after play, be it comedy or tragedy or hybrid forms, gods and abstractions tend to appear as prologues (following, in general, more Plautus, who had employed for that role Lar Familiaris, Fides, Auxilium, Arcturus, and Mercury, and Seneca's ghost prologues of *Thyestes* and *Agamemnon*, than Euripides),[25] choric figures (e.g. Ate in *Locrine*), main characters (e.g. in *The Cobbler's Prophecy* and *The Aphrodysial*), and, more rarely, epilogues (Astraea in *Tomumbeius*) – not as solving and unravelling agents. When, in *As You Like It*, Hymen (a figure which has been played in the most disparate ways over the centuries) enters to give a new meaning to the relationships between the several couples, he invites[26] the *dramatis personae* as well as the audience to question his agency and be rational:

> Whiles a wedlock hymn we sing,
> Feed yourself with questioning,

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[25] Such differences can be fuzzy in the early modern period: for example, the prologue of Robert Garnier's *Hyppolite* (1573) is spoken by the ghost of Aegeus but it "may have been inspired by the prologue of Aphrodite in the *Hippolytos* of Euripides" (Witherspoon 1968, 54), and, according to Wiggins and Richardson's *Catalogue*, Garnier's play was used as a source for the anonymous *Caesar and Pompey* performed at Trinity College, Oxford, in 1605.

[26] As often happens with gods on stage, Hymen uses a different metre from the one used by the other characters.

> That reason wonder may diminish
> How thus we met, and these things finish.
> (5.4.135-8)

It has been argued that the Elizabethan dramatists "openly scoffed at the device as an avoidance of good plotting", "[holding] strongly to the concept originally stated by Aristotle that a play should be composed of situations provoked by the characters themselves" (Hyde 1949, 87). This critical view is a conjecture and is not corroborated by Elizabethan documents, unlike what was happening on the Continent. We have seen that it is possible that one of the biggest problems was not dramaturgic in nature, but the fact that the device meant the intervention of a pagan god. Why was it so problematic to have a pagan god function as a *deus ex machina* at the end of a play? After all, as Gary Taylor puts it, the following may well have been the thoughts in the spectators' mind: "we do know that this is just playing, and the 'god' before us on stage is staged, stagey, stage-managed, a figure whose essence is the absence of essence" (2001, 14). Nevertheless, the *deus ex machina*, in all its spectacular artificiality, could raise urgent questions in a culture struggling over "the definition of the sacred" (Greenblatt 1988, 95), and this essay has shown that this device had been often and in different ways associated with popery. The all-too-easy solution of the *deus ex machina* could become a concern because "[t]he art of imagining the other in theatre begins with an intentional distancing that creates a space for contemporary epistemes to fill; it automatically entails investments of understanding and identification" (Miola 2001, 44). Immersed in the values and the world of a play where allegorisation is neither programmatic nor clear, spectators could reflect on their own ethical and religious beliefs, and even gain a new perspective. This has been suggested for some plays such as Shakespeare's romances, where:

> the gods are not only invoked and worshipped by ancient pagans, but really exist and change the course of the action. Audiences of Shakespeare's 'pagan plays' are not invited to interpret the pagan religious practices as allegories or as parables, but to experimentally become pagans. (Kullmann 2013, 49)

The gods of Shakespeare's tragicomedies and his contemporaries' later plays could appear once the iconoclast anxieties characterising the Elizabethan period had provisionally faded, and when the State had harnessed the *deus ex machina* to celebrate the court in the Stuart masque, refunctionalising its medievalism.[27] Besides, the function of the *deus ex machina* mutated, as Richard McCoy explains: "Even with deus ex machina descents in *Pericles* and *Cymbeline*, the happy ending depends less on gifts from gods than on merely human virtues of fidelity, forgiveness, and good fortune" (2015, 215).

Medieval miracle plays had made especial use of the *deus ex machina* device,[28] and the genre did not die out as utterly as once was thought: as Matthew Steggle remarks, there is a "line of continuation of the saints play tradition into the Renaissance commercial theatre" (2016, 58).[29] The association of the *deus ex*

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[27] On the Catholic connotations of the masque in early Stuart masques, also via Queen Anna and Queen Henrietta Maria, see e.g. Dunn-Hensley 2017, 775-108 and *passim*, and Demaubus 2003.

[28] Recent scholarship has shown that medieval drama itself could problematise the "theatricality of theology" and the "theology of theatricality", as Jody Enders argues (2003, 53), and the complex ways in which the agency of Divine Providence and the manifestation of saints were reformed in Protestant drama are a rich field of study.

[29] That the *deus ex machina* was a device linked with the miracle play genre is attested in a late, and yet quite interesting text. Alicia D'Anvers' *The Oxford-Act* (1693) describes a performance of the so-called Terrae Filius, an orator appointed to deliver satirical speeches in ceremonies marking the completion of an Oxford degree. D'Anveras first compares him to Aristophanes (who is called the original "*Terræ-Filius* of old *Athens*" (16), and then writes: "Tho some there are perhaps wou'd blame us, / For making their first rise so famous; / And think these Under-Graduates-Oracles / Deduc'd from *Cornwal*'s Givary Miracles, / From immemorial Custom there, / They raise a *Turfy Theatre;* / Where from a Passage under-Ground, / By frequent Crowds encompass'd round, / Out leaps some little Mephistophilus, / Who ev'n of all the Mob the Offal is, / True *Terrae-Filius* he, we reckon is, / Or *Anti-Theos Apomechanes"* (17). 'Anti-Theos Apomechanes' because the character pops out from the infernal underground, not from above. This text is curious because it implies that the Cornish miracle plays were still active at the end of the seventeenth century: "Givary", a *hapax legomenon*, probably refers to the *plen-an-gwary*,

machina with popery may have inhibited a wide use of the device in the context of the Reformed episteme, but it should be clarified that the experimentation in pagan mentalities suggested by Kullmann did not occur on a direct theological plane. One cannot but agree with Sarah Dewar-Watson when she stresses that the insistence of Shakespeare's late plays on metatheatre has important consequences on the way we perceive the theophanies:

> the late plays have a shared preoccupation with motifs of divine intervention and the device of theophany . . . But the concentration of these motifs . . . is a deliberate archaism, rather than a more immediate cultural reflex. There is an inexact equivalent between the deities which appear in *Cymbeline* and *Pericles* and the divine apparatus of the miracle play: for the medieval audience, the divine apparition is part of the revelation of Christian truth, while for Shakespeare's audience, these appearances of pagan gods can only reinforce their sense of the fictionality of the play. (2018, n.n.)

Such theophanies look back at Elizabethan dramatic romances such as *Clyomon and Clamydes* and *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune*, but with a different perspective and a different intended effect on their audience.

In 1599, Jonson had been attacked because, in the original ending of *Everyman Out of His Humour*, he had the scholar and agent of satire Macilente being utterly transformed by the mere sight of a boy playing Queen Elizabeth – a clear instance of a *dea ex machina.* Jonson defended his original plan, explaining that the conclusion "at the first playing" was misliked "*dia to ten basilissan prosopopoesthai*" (Jonson 2001, 372, "because of the Queen's having been portrayed on stage by an actor"). He claimed that such a device had been used also "in divers plays"[30] and "yearly in our

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the amphiteatre-like playing space of the Cornish. Richard Carew had referred to the "Guary miracle" as a common Cornish entertainment in the 1600s, characterised by "that grossenes, which accompanied the Romanes *vetus Comedia*" (1602, 71*r-v*).

[30] A silent actor playing the queen in the guise of Astraea also appears at the end of Marston's *Histriomastix* (1600-1603). Elizabeth-Astraea appeared also in George Peele's civic pageant *Descensus Astraeae* (1591), but there were many similar entertainments (but consider also Elizabeth's portrayal in Peele's

city pageants or shows of triumph" (ibid.); besides, he was sure that such a solution could have "a moral and mysterious end" (374). Yet, as Stephen Orgel observes, "the theatre was considered to have overstepped its bounds, making the monarch subject to the whim of the playwright, a prop for his drama" (2002, 86). Ben Jonson had to wait and fashion, alongside Inigo Jones, a new formula where the *deus ex machina* would be lavishly employed: the Stuart masque.

In the early modern period, the dynamics between theatre, idolatry, and religious truth was tense, as well encapsulated by Stephen Greenblatt, discussing *King Lear*: "*But if false religion is theater*, and if the difference between true and false religion is the presence of theater, what happens when this difference is enacted in the theater?" (1988, 126). The critical attitude, perhaps also scepticism, which could be generated as a ramification of the *deus ex machina* convention as reflected in Elizabethan texts invites further scrutiny: one can argue that the evident artificiality provided by the intervention of a *deus ex machina* made this device particularly problematic in the drama of such a confessionally fraught episteme.

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