Radek Chlup | ON THE NATURE
OF THE GODS:
METHODOLOGICAL
SUGGESTIONS FOR
THE STUDY OF GREEK
DIVINITIES

When some years ago I started to prepare a course of lectures on the Greek gods for students of the religious studies program at my home university, I was looking for the right method to use. It was clear that, to a large extent, I would have to do what all introductions to the Greek gods do: provide vivid descriptions of each divinity, recount its myths, and list its attributes, functions, and cults. I feared, however, that presented solely in this way the gods would not make enough sense, for their attributes and functions are mostly all too varied to appear to us as coherent, and their cults are replete with bizarre practices all too remote for us to relate to. My ambitions were greater: I wanted to capture the integrity of each divinity, presenting its multifarious attributes and functions as fitting together as pieces of a puzzle. And even more important, I wished to show the gods as a meaningful part of the Greek social and cultural world, as something that so naturally complements the Greek system of ideas and institutions that in fact these would begin to seem incomplete without the polytheistic backup in all its details.

To say that the gods are inseparably tied with local cultural worlds and must be analyzed in their historical context may sound obvious. However, it becomes a fairly demanding task if by "worlds" we do not just mean all

the institutions and customs normally studied by the historian but rather what William Paden calls "universes of language, behavior, and identity with their particular organizing categories."[1] For Paden, "world" is "not just a term for 'the totality of things' in general, but rather for the particular ways totalities are constructed in any particular environment"; it is "the structure of meaningful relationships in which a person exists and participates."[2] To make sense of the gods, therefore, one should ideally present them as an indispensable part of precisely such a structure of meaningful relationships. But how to do that for an audience that is no longer used to "gods" in the plural as a crucial organizing category of its world?

The Greeks themselves are only of limited help in this regard. We do possess a number of emic testaments to Greek piety, no doubt. We have Greek prayers; we have vivid portraits of the gods (both textual and visual); we know in what situations the Greeks saw it fit to sacrifice to them. But while the crucial values and categories of Greek religion are carefully spelled out in this way, how exactly they fit together and help to make the totality of one's life meaningful is to a large part left unspoken. This is mainly due to the fact that the "meaningfulness" we are talking about here is not of a discursive kind. It is lived rather than grasped intellectually.[3] For the insiders, their world is like a native language that they are able to speak fluently without having to study its grammar. It is only we outsiders who fail to grasp intuitively the "grammatical rules" of the foreign world, requiring painstaking scholarly analysis to make them explicit. What this implies is that true academic understanding of distant worlds may only be achieved by means of etic terms. It is not enough to put together what the natives say. We also need to grasp the tacit rules that make all the statements cohere—and as these are usually left unsaid by the insiders, we need to formulate them in our own terms. As Paden puts it, "The concept of world therefore includes not only a descriptive function, but also a redescriptive one. That is, it is not only used to attend to the categories of the insider's lifeworld, but also to account for them within the broader conceptual resources of the outside scholar. The analyst or comparativist brings a general understand-

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[1] William Paden, "World," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), 334.

[2] Paden, "World," 335.

[3] In this sense even rituals are meaningful, despite the claim of Frits Staal to the contrary ("The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26 [1979]: 2–22). Compare Ronald Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 318–19: "rituals do not refer to meanings in the way words do. If they have meaning at all, it is more akin to the way in which dance or music is meaningful. . . . Meaning is about resonance rather than either information or reference. To say that a ritual or an aspect of one is meaningful is not to say that it can be decoded, that symbol X refers to meaning Y. Rather, it is to say that X has a 'hook' or that it 'connects.'"

ing of world formation and its shaping factors to the interpretation of any single world."[4]

The procedure is similar to a grammatical analysis of a language for which no native grammatical terminology exists: what we have to do is apply our own morphological and syntactic categories, using them as tools that help us understand the peculiar internal logic of the language in question. In like fashion, we need to develop a set of "world-shaping" categories that we believe to be at work in all actual worlds, though always combined in a unique manner. In this way we may hope to understand the specific manners in which things make sense in each world without actually having to "go native" ourselves.

From this perspective, the gods may be seen as a particularly challenging world-shaping factor. We may perhaps compare them to an unusual grammatical category that does not exist in any of the modern Western languages, a special verbal mood, for instance. What we need to do is use our standard analytical terminology but put it together in a new manner so as to capture the principle and rules of usage of the strange category in question. It is precisely this that I intend to do in my article. In other words, in order to offer a *method* I will first have to search for a *theory* that will attempt to show what it is that makes the gods specific as a world-shaping category. I will try to spell out the tacit rules that connect the gods to the rest of the cultural system and make them appear as meaningful and indispensable. Being a classicist by specialization, I will focus strictly on the gods of ancient Greece, but I am convinced that with due modifications the same general principles might be relevant to other polytheistic pantheons as well.

THE GODS AS A SYSTEM OF CLASSIFICATION

What existing interpretations of the gods are there that might bring us closer to the goal just outlined? Clearly, the most promising approach is the one variously referred to as "cosmological," "symbolic," or "semiotic"—that is, the one that focuses on religions as sophisticated systems of meaning helping the adherents to orient themselves in the world and understand their place in it. If religion is seen as a system of classification, the gods may be regarded as its focal points, as personifications of its most important categories, values, and notions.

The first formulation of this conception was presented as far back as 1903 by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss: "Every mythology is fundamentally a classification. . . . Highly organized pantheons divide up all nature. . . . To attribute certain things in nature to a god amounts to the same thing as

[4] Paden, "World," 335–36.

to group them under the same generic rubric, or to place them in the same class."[5] Durkheim's idea of how exactly the divine classification works was fairly naive. Following the general trends of his day, he still saw religion as a precursor of science, a primitive attempt to understand one's society that is admirable from the evolutionary point of view but that cannot match the precision and objectivity of scientific categories, being colored by strong emotions and containing "subjective elements" that "must be progressively rooted out, if we are to approach reality more closely."[6] The fact that the attributes of the gods frequently overlap and are fairly difficult to bring into a clear-cut system was regarded by him as a sign of imprecision and lack of sophistication—a view that few scholars would accept today.

It was only in the 1960s that, under the influence of French structuralism, Durkheim's original idea was taken up, elaborated, and put on much more solid ground by Jean-Pierre Vernant in his groundbreaking article "Society of the Gods." Instead of comparing pantheons to scientific taxonomies, Vernant chose language as a much more natural term of comparison: "Thus their [i.e. the Greeks'] religion and their pantheon can be seen to be a system of classification, a particular way of ordering and conceptualizing the universe, distinguishing between multiple types of force and power operating within it. So in this sense I would suggest that a pantheon, as an organized system implying definite relations between the various gods, is a kind of language, a particular way of apprehending reality and expressing it in symbolic terms."[7]

By comparing pantheons with language, Vernant was able to present them as complex systems of meaning. After all, language too might seem imprecise at first sight, confusingly working with homonyms and synonyms and preferring symbolic polysemy to clarity and unequivocalness, and yet it is precisely on account of these features that it is capable to convey meaning in a highly efficient and flexible way. Accordingly, Vernant tried to show that pantheons are no less sophisticated. He insisted that the seeming haziness and disorderliness of the gods may be dispelled once we stick to two interconnected methodological principles. First, "the Greek gods are powers, not persons," and their various attributes and functions should therefore be seen as "linked, interdependent, as different aspects of a single divine power."[8] As he put it in another essay, "the mode of action employed by a god is more significant than the list of places where he intervened or of occasions which prompted him to

[5] Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, trans. Rodney Needham (1903; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 77–78.

[6] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain (1912; London: Allen & Unwin, 1976), 444.

[7] Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Society of the Gods," in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (London: Methuen, 1982), 94.

[8] Vernant, "Society of the Gods," 98.

do so."[9] Thus the dazzling variety of Zeus's functions starts to make sense once we regard them as different manifestations of "the power of sovereignty,"[10] and likewise the multifarious functions of Athena may be seen as different instances of the goddess's "cunning intelligence" (*mētis*) as her specific mode of action.[11] Second, it is impossible to see the coherence of a god's attributes when we study this god in isolation:

as with a linguistic system, it is impossible to understand a religious system without making a study of how the various gods relate to each other. . . . The study of a god such as Hermes, who is a very complex figure, must first define his relation to Zeus in order to pick out what it is in particular that Hermes contributes to the wielding of sovereign power, and then compare him with Apollo, Hestia, Dionysos and Aphrodite. Hermes has affinities with all of these gods but is distinguished from each of them by certain modes of action which are peculiar to him.[12]

For Vernant, the two points are interconnected. The *mētis* of Athena, for instance, can best be seen precisely when we take various domains of her activity and contrast her mode of action in those domains with that of other deities. Thus in the domain of horsemanship Poseidon "presided over the violence, the impetuousness, and the disturbing and uncontrollable strength of the animal, while Athena manifested herself by acting through the horse's bit, the technical metal instrument that made it possible to gain intelligent mastery over the animal and all its natural force."[13] Similarly, in the domain of craft Hephaistos is the god who gets his hands dirty by working with metals at the furnace, whereas "Athena had the technical ability to teach skills and promote male craft, but she did not, herself, work with these materials,"[14] representing the softer side of skilful craft and engaging herself mainly at the loom. In all these cases, however, she personified *mētis* as one of the crucial values Greek civilization leaned upon.

THE BOUNDARIES OF CLASSIFICATION

The structuralist approach has been successfully applied many times by both Vernant and other scholars inspired by him and has become an established part of classical studies; its merits are even admitted by those who do not quite

[9] Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 177.

[10] Vernant, "Society of the Gods," 95.

[11] Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, 177–86.

[12] Vernant, "Society of the Gods," 99.

[13] Marcel Detienne, "Experimenting in the Field of Polytheisms," *Arion* 7 (1999): 127–49, 135.

[14] Susan Deacy, *Athena* (London: Routledge, 2008), 52.

endorse it themselves.[15] Needless to say, it has frequently been a subject of criticism. Most of the usual objections, I believe, can be easily answered if we do not take Vernant's method as a panacea but rather as one perspective that is of necessity limited and whose insights need to be combined with other approaches.

1. Vernant's rigorous refusal to take seriously the personal aspects of the gods seems hardly tenable.[16] It is wiser to admit that the Greek gods have other facets beside the structural one and that from the point of view of ordinary worshippers their personal aspect was of importance after all.[17] Vernant's conception of Greek gods as powers should thus be seen as complementary to their equally strong personal side: the latter was prominent in the emic perspective of the worshippers, the former corresponds to the deeper structural logic that modern structuralism identifies behind the Greek pantheon as it attempts to bring out the implicit structure of meaningful relationships that the Greek cultural world consisted of.[18]

2. Even more important, once we do focus on the structural aspect, we soon discover that it is fairly difficult to square with data in all the details, particularly if we take into account all the regional peculiarities. As Bremmer puts it, "in the end, the polyvalent nature of the Greek gods and their historical developments will always oppose an all too strictly 'systemic' analysis."[19] It is vain to try to discover in religious phenomena strict logic in the sense we expect from a philosophical system, and it is more realistic to admit that some of their attributes arise by random association rather than by systematic expansion of the god's characteristic mode of action.[20] Still, this is not a reason for dismissing Vernant's approach. Rather, we should realize that the "system" Vernant was trying to find in the pantheon is a flexible one with many loose ends.[21]

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[15] For an excellent review of both the strengths and the weaknesses of Vernant's approach, see Robert Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 387–95.

[16] See, e.g., Jan N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 22–23, and "Introduction: The Greek Gods in the Twentieth Century," in *The Gods of Ancient Greece: Identities and Transformations*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Andrew Erskine (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 16–17.

[17] See, e.g., Henk S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 317, and the analysis of Hermes that follows.

[18] The ancient predecessors of this approach were the Neoplatonists, whose conception of the gods was equally structural and nonpersonal. See Radek Chlup, *Proclus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012),112–36.

[19] Bremmer, "Introduction: The Greek Gods in the Twentieth Century," 16.

[20] See Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens*, 392. As an example Parker gives Hermes who at Athens "became somewhat associated with cavalry commanders, apparently because the cavalry's place of muster chanced to abut the region of the agora known as 'the Herms.'"

[21] A good analysis of the problem is provided by Versnel, *Coping with the Gods*, who in his extensive discussion on the orderly versus chaotic features of the gods shows that the Greek

3. Closely tied to this is the frequent complaint that Vernant and his Paris school combine data from different times and places, disrespecting their original contexts and creating an artificial system that never actually existed as a whole.[22] The obvious reply is to distinguish different levels at which cultural phenomena may be analyzed, one focusing more on the level of *culture* in the sense of a loosely connected stock of basic conceptions and concerns, the other on that of *society* in the sense of particular historically grounded forms of organizing social relations between individuals in a community. While social systems differed greatly from one polis to another (not to speak of different epochs), Greek culture—as expressed, for example, in the shared body of literary texts—was much more stable and much less locally bound. From this perspective, the gods may be studied both as a regular Panhellenic set of divinities whose general characteristics are shared by all the Greeks and as parts of unique and much more irregular systems of worship that are particular to each polis but that can only be intelligible when read as permutations of the same basic Panhellenic themes. It is true that the cultural system is to a large extent an abstraction artificially extracted by modern scholars from various locally and temporally disconnected data, but there is nothing illegitimate in making use of such constructs as long as we take them as such and are aware of their limitations.[23]

In my article, therefore, I will build on Vernantian structuralism, but I will try to point out some of its limits that are internal rather than external, the acknowledgment of which might help us to deepen the approach rather than abandon it. Briefly, I am convinced that Vernant underestimated some of the specifically *religious* features of the gods. To see Athena as an embodiment of "cunning intelligence," for instance, is certainly a great idea, but one wonders why it required a goddess (instead of some legendary human figure, for instance, or perhaps a wholly impersonal symbol of some sort). After all, there is no reason why a cultural system of classification should require divine beings at all—as we can clearly see from our own society today. Vernant's

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world consisted of a number of local and contextual classification systems that were frequently contradictory, but whose incongruousness was avoided by constantly switching from one register to another, never considering them all at once. For Versnel, culture consists not just in imposing order on the disorderly flow of human experience but more precisely in "the overlapping and clashing of different classifications and coping with it" (*Coping with the Gods*, 149). In this regard, "the different local pantheons represent multiple frames of reference, contexts and perspectives, each of them serving to help create order in an otherwise confusing diversity" (*Coping with the Gods*, 146).

[22] Thus, e.g., Joseph D. Reed, "The Sexuality of Adonis," *Classical Antiquity* 14 (1995): 317–47, esp. 322–23, in his criticism of Marcel Detienne.

[23] On the interrelation between the Panhellenic and the local level of the Greek gods, see Vinciane Pirenne Delforge and Gabriella Pironti, "Many vs. One," in *Oxford Handbook of Ancient Greek Religion*, ed. Esther Eidinow and Julia Kindt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

approach is certainly inspiring in that it focuses on a function of pantheons whose secular version we know perfectly well from our own world (namely that of classification), in this way helping us to understand what otherwise might seem as "primitive" and irrational. But in doing so it tends to ignore some of the differences that I see as no less important for truly understanding polytheistic worlds. It is to these differences, therefore, that we should turn.

What is it that makes the gods most unlike the classificatory markers that we know from our own world? In my view, it is first and foremost their *extremism*. The Greek gods are anthropomorphic, and in many cases (e.g., in divine statues) it might seem that they embody the ideals humans would like to achieve themselves: they are beautiful, strong, swift, healthy, and so forth. There is no denying that this ideal aspect was important, but it is one side of the coin only. If ideals were all the gods stood for, divinities would have been regarded as models to imitate. Yet, while this might have been the case on some limited occasions, the general ethos of Greek religion was the very opposite of this. "Ironically, the human form which the Greeks shared with their gods often served as a reminder of the distance that separated mortals and immortals."[24] As Apollo warns Diomedes in the *Iliad* (5.440–42): "Do not wish to think the same thoughts that the gods do, for the race of humans, who walk upon the earth, will never be similar to that of the immortal gods."[25]

The reason why the gods should not be imitated lies precisely in their extremity. A god is able to embody each feature and character trait in absolute purity. Artemis is a chaste virgin, taking this to absolute extremes and having her whole life perfectly adjusted to this. Aphrodite, on the other hand, is a goddess of total sensuousness, whose erotic seductiveness goes beyond anything mortals are able to achieve. For humans, neither of these positions is tenable. In the eyes of the Greeks (who never developed the institution of celibacy) a mortal individual can be neither altogether chaste nor completely erotic. In this regard, Artemis and Aphrodite are ideals indeed, but ones that in principle cannot be attained—and if some people try, they inevitably fail. The fate of Hippolytus (as presented by Euripides) is a classic example: at first sight it might seem that by being totally devoted to Artemis and pursuing the life of moral and physical purity he did nothing wrong. Yet, in the eyes of the Greeks he committed the sin of one-sidedness, deservedly angering Aphrodite for his neglect of her. It is only a goddess who can afford to stick to one pattern of life and bring it to perfection. Humans are bound to compromise, having to relate to many gods and paying homage to each of them partially only.

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[24] Albert Henrichs, "What Is a Greek God?," in *The Gods of Ancient Greece: Identities and Transformations*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Andrew Erskine (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 29.

[25] All the translations from Greek are mine unless stated otherwise.

Rather than regarding anthropomorphic gods as human *ideals*, therefore, we might perhaps more adequately describe them as human *superlatives*: they have the same features that we do, but they are always pushed to an extreme degree. They behave like human beings, but with an intensity and power that transcends anything humans are capable of. Nowhere is this more conspicuous than in their notorious immoral features. While these were strongly criticized by ancient philosophers, they are in fact an integral part of the traditional conception of the divine. If the gods act as human superlatives, they do so in both in good and in evil. Like human beings, for instance, they succumb to emotions, but they do so to an excessive extent. It is for this reason that in Homer and elsewhere episodes from the life of the gods often resemble undignified burlesques. If the gods sometimes embody human ideals, they are equally capable to act as paragons of passion and immorality.

The immoral side of the divine is something that Greek intellectuals (including the later poets, such as Pindar or Euripides) already tended to see as something inauthentic, and modern scholars have all too often followed suit. In recent decades, of course, classical antiquity has ceased to be regarded primarily as a lofty cultural model to emulate, and the immoral aspects of the divine are no longer suppressed—but in most cases they are not appreciated either. Vernant's approach is a fitting example: by regarding the gods as classificatory markers—that is, as personifications of crucial values, notions, and patterns of behavior—he brings out precisely the *ideal* aspects of the gods, leaving aside their transgressive features. In his actual analyses, of course, Vernant does take them into account in many cases,[26] but he never really incorporates this into his theory.

What Vernant's model is missing has been well summarized by John Gould, who claims "that gods may be seen not as super-humans but as bestial; as 'natural', not 'cultural' powers; wild, not tamed. Divinity too is, potentially at least, anomalous: the divine powers are and are not part of the structure of 'social' relationships."[27] As Gould puts it in another essay, "the uniqueness of the divine is the combination of these contradictory aspects, predictable and unpredictable, human and non-human; the essence of divinity lies in the paradoxical coexistence of incompatible truths about human experience. . . . For if a god, as I take it, is made in the image of man (inevitably, as Xenophanes saw), equally inevitably divinity must surpass man in some sense or another, and must reveal the possibility of 'otherness.' . . . A god wholly within

[26] Compare, e.g., his brilliant analysis of Artemis, which comes very close to the kind of approach I am proposing: Jean-Pierre Vernant, "The Figure and Functions of Artemis in Myth and Cult," in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, ed. Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 195–206.

[27] John Gould, "Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 100 (1980): 38–59, 58.

the compass of man's image of himself explains nothing, offers no reassurance against the fear of chaos."[28]

It is precisely this approach that I would like to develop in the rest of my article.[29] However, my aim is to show the transgressive aspect of the gods not as a negation of their orderly structuralist analysis but rather as its complement and culmination. To do so, I will make use of what Terence Turner has labeled as "Anglo-structuralism,"[30] that is, the British anthropological tradition of Mary Douglas, Edmund Leach, and Victor Turner that sees structure as essentially bound with "anti-structure" and liminality. In the field of classical studies my main inspiration will be James Redfield, whose approach to the gods comes very close to mine, but who has never attempted to summarize it.[31]

GODS AS PROTECTORS OF BOUNDARIES

We have seen that while the gods do stand for ideal types, they also serve as a warning. In other words, while the gods help to delimit order, they are not a part of it themselves. One of the reasons for this lies in their purity: in gods, all ideal characteristics exist as something isolated and absolute. Our world makes this impossible, for it is an essentially mixed place, implicating each thing into a complex net of relations with other things and forcing them to reach a compromise and never to behave according to one principle only. At the same time, the gods are paradoxically able to combine several of these absolute features and connect realms of experience that in human terms are incompatible. Athena is a war goddess but also a patroness of weaving. As Parker puts it: "Gods differ from mortals, therefore, not merely in power but

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[28] John Gould, "On Making Sense of Greek Religion," in *Greek Religion and Society*, ed. Patricia E. Easterling and John V. Muir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 32–33.

[29] The anomalous "counter-intuitive" aspect of the gods has of course recently been greatly stressed by the cognitivists (e.g., Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 4), but their approach is radically different from mine. While my aim is to read the gods as a horizon of meaning, which despite its paradoxicality helps to make sense of one's "lifeworld," behind the cognitivist project one can read a fundamental mistrust in the gods' ability to make sense and the need to explain how something so fundamentally meaningless can persist as a cultural idea at all.

[30] Terence Turner, "Structure, Process, Form," in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 224–28.

[31] James Redfield, "From Sex To Politics: The Rites of Artemis Triklaria and Dionysos Aisymnetes at Patras," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); James Redfield, *The Locrian Maidens: Love and Death in Greek Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

also in this multi-dimensionality; they are not superhuman humans but bundles of powers quite inconceivable in human terms."[32]

By supervising various ideal categories of the human world while not being constrained by them themselves, the gods achieve something remarkable: not only do they help to define the relations between things in the world, but they also give a fixed external boundary to it. Thanks to them the world appears as a clearly demarcated place governed by principles standing behind its boundaries. I believe that this "transcendence" (in the sense of standing above the rules of the cultural system) is in fact a crucial feature that allows the gods to support the system while balancing out some of its inevitable limitations. Every cultural arrangement of reality is limited. Out of all the possible orderings of things it only represents one set, suppressing all the others. Since human society depends on the acceptance of such systems, it needs to possess some mechanisms that protect them and cover up for their possible deficiencies. I suggest viewing the gods as a highly efficient mechanism of this kind.

In what follows I will focus on three basic types of risk that endanger human orders and show how the gods allowed the Greeks to deal with these.

A. THE NORM AND ITS LIMITS: THE GODS AS CONSTRUCTIVE OTHERNESS

Every system of classification is arbitrary. The Greeks took it for granted, for instance, that men should be politically active, while women should not. To us the naturalness of this arrangement is no longer obvious. This is not to say that we are right and the Greeks were wrong. Our own emphasis of gender equality is no less a type of classification than the Greek model was. The crucial point is that each system of classification is constantly endangered by the possibility of alternative arrangements. The gods seem to present an institutionalized way of facing this threat. The gods are "other" and are not bound by human cultural rules. Greek goddesses certainly do not behave as good Greek women should: they are highly active in public affairs, take part in warfare, and see no need to stay confined to house life (except for Hestia, of course, who again embodies this confinement in an extreme degree, never leaving the paternal house at all). But despite transgressing human rules, the gods are also those who establish these rules. Thanks to this, they offered the Greeks an opportunity for confrontation with otherness without destabilizing the entire system. While normally the possibility of violating the rules would be seen as dangerous, the gods manage to convert this danger into positive power, which they use to support the order in turn. The gods stand for constructive otherness. Their fascinating penchant for transgression is explicitly presented as something

[32] Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens*, 389.

no mortal can endure, which teaches humans negatively to stick to the rules and leave it up to the gods to deal with the chaos that lies beyond the norm.

As an illustration I will take the very goddess Vernant and Detienne famously used to explain their method: Athena. Whereas most other divinities are transgressive at first sight, indulging in various kinds of "immoral" behavior, Athena's dark side is far less obvious. Being a goddess of prudence and intelligence, she appears in myths as a calm, moderate figure whose emotions are much more controlled than those of Hera, Demeter, or Aphrodite. To be sure, she does have her fierce side as well, being famous for her flashing, mesmerizing gaze as well as her terrifying magical weapon, the aegis, but she mainly uses these dark powers of hers in defence of the Olympian order, averting dangerous enemies, such as the giants, whom she is frequently portrayed killing. Things become more startling, however, as we learn that after killing one of these giants called Pallas, Athena flayed him and used his skin as a shield (Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1.6.2). Several authors add that this Pallas was actually Athena's father and that she only killed him after he had tried to rape her.[33] Marginal as these stories are, they develop a motif that is implicit even in the classic myth of Athena's birth, in which she was born out of Zeus's head after Hephaistos had cracked it open with an axe. As Burkert comments, "splitting of the skull is always fatal, and Hephaistos has good reason to flee with his axe, as many vase paintings portray, after he has struck the blow. . . . This—never expressed—element of patricide in the birth myth leads back to the apocryphal Pallas myth."[34]

What are we to make of this "primitive ferocity"[35] manifested by a goddess who is a patroness of prudence and the art of civilization? What we see here is a sharp contrast between cultured prudence as a crucial value of the Greeks and the dark roots out of which it grows. Athena appears as a goddess who is positioned at the boundary between these two poles: with one foot she is standing on the chaotic side, but at the same time she is ready to deal with this chaos and transform it into a power on which humans can lean in their effort to maintain civilized life. What exactly were the chaotic elements Athena was helping to keep at bay in this manner? Since all religious images are essentially polyvalent, there are many possible answers to this question. For the purpose of this article I will focus on just one of these possibilities, taking the myth of Athenian origins as a fitting illustration.[36]

[33] Cicero, *De natura deorum* 3.59; Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 2.28.2; Firmicus Maternus, *De errore* 16.1–2.

[34] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 142–43.

[35] Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 140.

[36] In the subsequent paragraphs I draw heavily on Redfield, *The Locrian Maidens*, 118–27, and on Radek Chlup, "*Illud Tempus* in Greek Myth and Ritual," *Religion* 38 (2008): 355–65, esp. 362–63.

According to Apollodorus (3.14), the god Hephaestus once tried to get hold of Athena, but as the goddess would not submit, he only managed to ejaculate on her thigh. Athena wiped the sperm off with wool and threw it to the ground, thus impregnating it. After some time Erichthonios was born from the earth. Athena put him in a chest and gave it to the three daughters of Kekrops (the first king of Athens, who had also been born from the earth) for them to guard. Though strictly forbidden, two of the girls opened it out of curiosity, beholding a dreadful spectacle: a serpent coiled around the baby. The girls were driven mad by the sight and leaped from the Acropolis.

To the historical Athenians this myth was of great importance, functioning as a charter of their autochthony: they saw Erichthonios as their ancestor, which meant that they themselves were ultimately born from the earth, with Athena as their mother. In the classical period Attic orators referred to this myth to demonstrate the moral superiority of the Athenians over the inhabitants of other cities, whose territory was conquered by their ancestors: "They had not been collected, like most nations, from every quarter, and had not settled in a foreign land after driving out its people: they were born of the soil, and possessed in one and the same country their mother and their fatherland."[37]

The idea of autochthony was crucial for the Athenians, yet it was highly anomalous, presenting as natural something the Greeks knew only too well to be a product of historical contingence. The anomalousness was symbolized by Erichthonios, whose birth was paradoxical indeed, being both sexual and asexual, and combining the human and the animal, the civilized and the chthonic. No wonder that the sight of him scared the daughters of Kekrops to death.

While Erichthonios was able to express the paradox of Athenian origins, it required a goddess to pacify its potentially disruptive power and turn it into positive energy. Athena's crucial part comes out in a mysterious Athenian festival in her honor called the Arrhephoria. In it, two girls, who had lived in Athena's sanctuary on the Acropolis for the whole year and performed various services for the goddess, were entrusted with a strange task during a final night ceremony: they were given a chest whose content was not known to anyone, and they were supposed to take it to some place below the Acropolis, where they received another mysterious packet that they brought back, whereupon they were discharged from their service.[38]

Plainly, the ritual imitates the original myth of the daughters of Kekrops, but without repeating their mistake. The mythical maidens die, but the ritual

[37] Lysias, *Epitaphios* 17, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930). See in detail Nicole Loraux, *Born of the Earth: Myth and Politics in Athens*, trans. S. Stewart (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 47–64.

[38] See Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.27.3.

ones overcome their curiosity and keep the chest closed. What was the content of the chest? The factual answer to this question is both irrelevant and impossible to provide. In symbolic terms, however, the answer is clear: it contained the mystery of Athenian origins as expressed by the paradoxical myth of Erichthonios. The myth of Athenian autochthony is but one example of the general truth that the ultimate roots of social and political arrangements are always monstrous and mysterious, for they always need to present as stable and natural what is fragile and arbitrary. "The Athenians acknowledge this, but while admitting the monstrous foundations of their own identity, they make the decisive step of not tampering with it, leaving it behind the borders of their world. The Arrhephoroi carry the arcane source of Athenian power in their chests, but they resist the temptation and do not open them. The secret of primordiality can remain concealed and keep its strength."[39]

The Arrhephoroi can achieve this thanks to Athena, who guarantees that the secret of the Athenians will be in safe hands. The goddess has her own dark roots, but she has been able to suppress them and keep them hidden under her calm, cultured face. Unlike humans, she is able to face the primordial chaos, withstand it, and fight it back, thus setting a firm boundary between it and the civilized world.

B. INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS: HOLDING THE SYSTEM TOGETHER

Another risk that the gods may help to deal with concerns the fact that no ordering is able to contain all of reality; there will always be situations that do not fit. Life is more complex than any system of classification. The point is summarized in a classic manner by Victor Turner: "The fact is that any kind of coherent, organized social life would be impossible without the assumption that certain values and norms, imperatives and prohibitions, are axiomatic in character, ultimately binding on everyone. However, for many reasons, the axiomatic quality of these norms is difficult to maintain in practice, since in the endless variety of real situations, norms considered equally valid in abstraction are frequently found to be inconsistent with one another, and even mutually to conflict."[40]

If a model of classification is to survive, therefore, it can never be a seamless logical system free of all internal contradictions. Rather, it has to be a loosely coordinated set of various ideological principles that functions situa-

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[39] Chlup, "*Illud Tempus* in Greek Myth and Ritual," 363. Compare Redfield, *The Locrian Maidens*, 126. It was Claude Lévi-Strauss, of course, who first drew attention to the paradox entailed in autochthony in his classic paper "The Structural Study of Myth," *Journal of American Folklore* 68 (1955): 428–44, esp. 434.

[40] Victor Turner, "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual," in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 39–40.

tionally, always evoking just a limited number of ideal norms that fit the situation in question while suppressing the others. The Greeks were convinced, for instance, that women were unsuitable for politics on account of being more irrational than men, easily yielding to emotions, being obsessed with sex, and being incapable of self-control. Clearly, though, such an image was untenable in a number of situations in which Greek males simply needed to rely on their women. Accordingly, there existed a completely different image, praising the woman as a chaste housewife who begets legitimate children, manages the household, and provides firm support to her husband. The Greeks took it for granted that both images somehow apply to women, feeling no need to investigate into their exact relationship.

The supportive functions of the gods in such cases consist in their ability to contain contradictions of this kind and mediate between them. They are able to do so first of all thanks to their polytheistic plurality and its aversion to one-sidedness. While each goddess represents some ideal type of the feminine, for instance, none of these types can be taken as positive images to be followed in full, for in the divine sphere each element of female behavior is brought to extreme. In real life a woman had to be on friendly terms with all the goddesses, not to follow just one of them, though her preferences could vary as circumstances required: sometimes she moved closer to chaste Artemis, at other times to sensuous Aphrodite, but at no time did she lose her connection with the other goddesses completely. In this way she managed to meet all the ideal requirements imposed on her by Greek culture without being crushed by their weight, for the polytheistic system allowed her to flexibly renegotiate her identity in relation to the goddesses again and again.

Even more important, the same plurality is repeated within each individual god, who also has many facets that are not always easy to reconcile, thus introducing even more elasticity into the system. Artemis, for instance, is not just a patroness of maidens before marriage but also a goddess of childbirth. In other cases, the gods are able to combine features that are not just related to different situations or life stages but that were seen by Greek culture as incompatible in principle, such as when Demeter manages to negotiate an extensive periodical return of her daughter from the house of her legitimate husband Hades—a deal that ordinary Greek women could never even dream of. In cases such as these the gods seem to mediate some crucial contradiction within the cultural order, filling in various dangerous gaps in the system and helping to hold together what otherwise might threaten to fall apart. To achieve this, they have to transcend the very order that they found and guarantee.

To illustrate this in greater detail, I will once again return to Athena, who in terms of standard Greek categories is one of the most paradoxical deities. While most goddesses are at first sight associated with various legitimate aspects of female identity (Hera with married wives, Demeter with mothers, Ar-

temis with maidens, etc.), Athena is an elusive deity whose transgressiveness consists in the first place in the way she mixes various categories that would normally be seen as strictly exclusive. She is "a deity who confounds gendered norms."[41] Though a woman, she behaves more like a man. Nowhere is this more obvious than in her warrior features, which go directly against Greek gender rules, making her similar to the Amazons. Unlike them, however, Athena is distinctly supportive of Zeus's patriarchal order and has been seen by feminist interpreters as "a traitor to her sex who sides with the male at the expense of other females."[42] Despite all this, she is still presented as an attractive maiden, for example, when taking part in the beauty contest judged by Paris and when arousing the sexual lust of Hephaistos. While being a patron of various male crafts, such as pot making or metalwork, her "particular skill, woolworking, was, in contrast, the consummate female activity for a society where the proper role for women was working at the loom."[43]

Why is a beautiful chaste maiden at the same time a warrior goddess?[44] Distant as these two things may seem at first, they do have one thing in common: the art of defense against potential conquerors. As we have seen above, Athena is always ready to defend herself against various suitors (such as Hephaistos or her giant father Pallas). In the same manner she plays the part of the "holder of cities" (*poliouchos*), guarding them against illegitimate attacks of their enemies. A mythical symbol of this protecting power was the Palladion, a small statue of Pallas Athena that was meant to make Troy unconquerable, but which in fact functioned as the city's Achilles' heel: once it was stolen by Odysseus and Diomedes, Troy became defenseless.

According to one tradition, the Palladion was Athena's wedding gift to Chryse at her marriage with Dardanos, the ancestor of the Trojans.[45] Why was the statue of a virginal goddess associated with a bride? Just as the Palladion was coming to the city as a gift from the outside in order to become the city's protecting center, even so it was the task of the new-coming wife to become the guardian of the household and to keep it inviolable by remaining faithful to her husband. Athena was there to help with this difficult task, acting as a warden of female chastity. Her protective stance toward wives is perhaps best seen in her patronage of weaving—an activity that was seen by the Greeks as a symbol of chastity. The classic example is Penelope, who manages to keep off the suitors by constantly weaving a burial shroud for the father of Odysseus, unravelling by night what she has woven by day (Homer,

41 Deacy, *Athena*, 31.
42 Thus Deacy (*Athena*, 13), who is herself rather critical of such feminist readings.
43 Deacy, *Athena*, 52.
44 The following paragraphs are again inspired by Redfield, *The Locrian Maidens*, 141–50.
45 Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 1.68–69.

Odyssey 19.137–58). Weaving thus works as a protection against illegitimate sexuality.[46]

All of this, however, entails a paradox: "As the Palladion guarantees the integrity of the city, so the woman guards the integrity of the house, yet she is only there because she had been brought from elsewhere. Her duties require her to be strong, yet she is culturally defined as weak; the house must rely on her faith yet distrust her as potentially faithless. She is both integrating center and weak point."[47] The paradox does not just concern individual wives in individual households but is tied to the position of women in the polis in general. For the Greeks women represented the reproductive center of the city, being frequently likened to queen bees that the entire beehive depends upon, but at the same time they were marginalized and inferior to males. We can thus see a symbolic homology between three paradoxes: (1) the wife as both the integrating center and the weak point of the household; (2) women in general as both central and marginal in the city; (3) the Palladion as both protecting the city and vulnerable to outside attacks. It is significant that a number of historical cities actually claimed to possess the original Palladion: Athens, Argos, Sparta, Rome, and others, each professing to own the original and denying the genuineness of other Palladia.[48] While extremely unique and precious, therefore, one could never be quite certain of its authenticity. In this way the Palladion constantly maintained the air of something fragile and uncertain, helping the Greeks to reflect in an indirect way on the fragility of the institution of the polis.

What we see here is a nice example of the kind of internal cultural inconsistencies mentioned above. Athena helped to bridge them over by uniting in her divine personality what could never quite be united in the human world. She was herself a highly paradoxical being: a chaste girl weaving at the loom, and a mighty warrior impossible to defeat; an emancipated female who seems to threaten the patriarchal order in the manner of the Amazons, but who in fact of all the goddesses is the most consistent "upholder of patriarchy, trusted by her father more than any other deity and even given access to his thunderbolt."[49] In this way she made cognitively bearable a basic inconsistency in the Greek cultural order whose paradoxicality might otherwise be difficult

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[46] At the same time, weaving functions as an important religious, cosmic, and political symbol: the most important votive gift for Athena at the Panathenaea was a huge *peplos* woven by a team of girls for nine months and depicting Athena's victory over the giant Enkelados. Just as in the case of Penelope, the ever newly woven *peplos* was meant to confirm the inviolability of the goddess as well as to renew the contract between her and the city.

[47] Redfield, *The Locrian Maidens*, 149.

[48] For references see Redfield, *The Locrian Maidens*, 143.

[49] Deacy, *Athena*, 31.

to stand. As a goddess she was strong enough to contain the paradox and prevent it from disturbing the human world.

c. transformational nature of the divine: allowing movement in a static system

The last helpful feature of the gods I would like to mention concerns their ability to mediate movement between otherwise static states of a cultural system. Systems of classification are of necessity static, they tend to stabilize the continuous flow of everyday experience by dividing it into clear-cut categories that are perceived as distinct and permanent. In practice, however, members of society occasionally need to pass from one category to another, for example, from a maiden to a married woman. While this might seem to be an easy task to us moderns, who have developed a flexible classification system with permeable boundaries, in most traditional societies such a passage is found to be much more difficult. For them, as van Gennep noticed already, all changes from one position in the system of classification to another "do not occur without disturbing the life of society and the individual, and it is the function of rites of passage to reduce their harmful effects."[50]

What exactly happens in ritual transitions is analyzed in detail by Terence Turner.[51] In his view, to reconcile the requirement of unchangeable categories with the need to pass between them a social system has to consist of two different levels: "the lower levels of the system," which "essentially consist of static matrices or sets of relations, categories and groups," and "the upper levels of the system," which allow to transform one state of the lower level into another. Since the upper levels "constitute operations of a different structural order," they "cannot be formulated or described, and therefore cannot be easily controlled, in the terms appropriate to the lower levels."[52] Accordingly, their descriptions "will tend to be couched in terms of paradox, or the negation or inversion of lower-level criteria" and they will "be seen from the standpoint of the lower levels as standing to them in a relation of . . . generalized potential to specific realization, dynamic to static, and transcendent to immanent."[53]

The upper level will also tend to be seen, from the standpoint of the lower level, as both the indispensable, generative ground of the system, a source of powers of a higher

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[50] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (1909; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 13.

[51] Terence Turner, "Transformation, Hierarchy, and Transcendence: A Reformulation of van Gennep's Model of the Structure of Rites de Passage," in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara Myerhoff (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977), 57–58.

[52] Turner, "Transformation, Hierarchy, and Transcendence," 58.

[53] Turner, "Transformation, Hierarchy, and Transcendence," 58.

order, and at the same time as a domain of relatively uncontrollable and therefore dangerous powers. The essential form of this danger is the implied negation, through mediation or transcendence, or the boundaries of specific categories, relations or groups, and the fixed relations among such entities that comprise the lower level of the structural order.[54]

Abstruse as this may sound, it is no more than a refinement on Victor Turner's classic conception of structure (= the lower level) and antistructure (= the upper level). What Terence Turner wants to stress is that antistructure is not simply a lack of structure but rather a structure of a more complex and paradoxical kind. Since an upper level serves as a tool for transforming one state of the standard order of classification into another, it needs to be clearly related to the lower levels, echoing their basic categories. At the same time, however, it plays strange games with these categories, distorting them and turning them upside down, for its essence lies not in the categories as such but rather in the possibility to mediate between them.

The gods are a perfect example of this. On the one hand, they are associated with various categories of the lower system, in many cases acting as their divine patrons: Artemis embodies the status of a maiden, Hera that of a married wife. Yet, the gods can hardly be seen as ideal images of these states and as models to imitate: real Greek maidens did not spend their time hunting in the wilderness; real Greek wives were not supposed to emulate the quarrelsome wife of Zeus. One possible reason for this discrepancy lies in the transformational nature of the divine. What the gods really embody in these cases are not the standard states as such but rather some crucial transformations connected with these states, that is, the liminal zones that form their boundaries.[55]

To illustrate this, we may have a brief look at Hera. While the Greeks themselves conceptualized her as the patroness of married wives, it is striking that most myths concerning the marriage of Zeus and Hera do not depict their happy

[54] Turner, "Transformation, Hierarchy, and Transcendence," 58.

[55] In this regard I would slightly diverge from Redfield, who sees the gods rather as stable landmarks, whose immutability is opposed to the human need to pass from one to another (*The Locrian Maidens*, 114): "The gods provide a set of roles and masks that can be assumed and shed in sequence, or a set of patrons and companions whose spheres we may traverse. They stay where they are, but we change by moving from one to another." It is true that the gods do have strong stable aspect of the kind described by Redfield and that in one regard many of them do represent clearly defined ideal states: Artemis is eternally a maiden, Hera a wife, Demeter a mother. Yet most myths about the gods are no idyllic descriptions of these states but rather thematizations of various problems entailed in them: most of the mythical companions of Artemis die tragically, the main Demeter myth concerns the loss of her daughter and her hard struggle against the rules of legitimate patriarchal marriage. This suggests that it is really the transformations connected with these states that are crucial, the states themselves representing rather an indispensable background that makes the transformations intelligible.

cohabitation. Instead, they describe either the various ways in which Zeus se-
duced Hera and had his first intercourse with her in secrecy "behind the backs
of their dear parents" (Homer, *Iliad* 14.296), or their various quarrels, which
in some cases led to a temporary breakup of their marriage. Both of these sit-
uations are interconnected, as can be seen, for example, from the Plataia myth
told by Pausanias (9.3.1–2) in which Zeus tries to solve their marriage crisis
by pretending he is about to wed another woman; as soon as the wedding pro-
cession sets out, sulking Hera returns from her retreat and angrily tears away
the dress from the bride, only to discover that it was no more than a wooden
image: in effect she is reconciled with her husband, taking the place of the
bride herself.

   It is not possible in this article to deal with all the levels of meanings that
these myths (and the rituals connected with them) have.[56] Here I would just
point out that one thing stories of this kind imply is that Hera is not a goddess
of marriage in the sense of a permanent state but rather in the sense of the
transformations that this state implies. This can clearly be seen in Stympha-
los, where, according to Pausanias (8.22.2), the mythical Temenos estab-
lished three sanctuaries of Hera—one for Hera the Girl (*Pais*), one for Hera
the Married (*Teleia*), and one for Hera the Separated (*Chēra*)—"when for
some cause or other she quarrelled with Zeus." Clearly, Hera protects mar-
riage by guarding its boundaries: both the initial boundary that a maiden has
to pass to become a married woman and the final boundary that threatens to
dissolve the marriage. Unfortunately, we know nothing about the situations
in which women sacrificed to Hera the Separated, but we do hear of interesting
rituals related to the first boundary: on Samos the bride and groom had to have
their first sexual intercourse in secret before the wedding, on Naxos the bride
has to spend the night before the wedding with a prepubescent boy "with both
parents living" (i.e., bringing good fortune), all of this in imitation of the first
secret intercourse of Zeus and Hera.[57] Rites such as these attest to the notion of
wedding as a transition fraught with dangers that can only be turned into a
blessing by appealing to the gods in their transgressive aspect (and by making

[56] For the general dynamics behind these stories, see Vinciane Pirenne Delforge and Gabriella
Pironti, "La féminité des déesses à l'épreuve des épiclèses: Le cas d'Héra," in *La religion des
femmes en Grèce ancienne: Mythes, cultes et société*, ed. L. Bodiou and V. Mehl (Rennes: Presses
universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 95–109. For various interpretations of the Daidala festival, which
was related to the Plataia myth, see Angelos Chaniotis, "Ritual Dynamics: The Boiotian Festival of
the Daidala," in *Kykeon: Studies in Honour of H. S. Versnel*, ed. Herman F. J. Horstmanshoff, Henk
W. Singor, Folkert T. Van Straten, and Jan H. M. Strubbe (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 23–48.
   [57] *Scholia in Iliadem* 14.296; Callimachus, *Aetia*, fr. 75. According to Pollux (*Onomasticon*
3.39–40), it was a general Greek custom for a bride to spend the night before wedding with a
little boy in the house of the bridegroom and for a bridegroom with a little girl in the house of the
father-in-law.

ritual use of a boy in whom sexuality has not yet awakened, and who is thus immune to its dangers).

To summarize the main theoretical points of the preceding section, I suggest considering the gods as a highly efficient cultural mechanism for supporting the cultural system by providing it both with firmness and with plasticity. Their function is to introduce flexibility into the rigid system of rules that societies tend to create, and to mediate the contradictions that every cultural world entails.

While upholding human categories, the gods may do what humans cannot. This makes them potentially dangerous beings, but through proper worship this danger can be converted into supportive power. In this regard I agree with Henrichs's claim that the "most ubiquitous quality that defines a Greek god is divine power"[58] and that "Greek polytheism can be likened to a power grid in which the gods function as energy cells that reinforce each other and deliver boundless energy to an entire network of human consumers, for better or worse."[59] Unlike Henrichs, however, I do not see this power as something necessarily "elusive and hard to pin down"[60] but rather as something that is linked with systems of classifications and their relation to disorder. The point is well put by Mary Douglas: "Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides material of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder is by implication unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power. Ritual recognizes the potency of disorder."[61]

While power may indeed appear as inscrutable once we solely focus on its diverse manifestations as experienced by the worshippers, I believe at least some of its aspects can be analyzed systematically if we see it as arising in the creative exchange between order and disorder. Power results from the tensions generated by the dominant order of classification and can therefore be examined in relation to these tensions. Thus, to understand Greek goddesses we first need to consider all the categories related to women in the Greek

[58] Henrichs, "What Is a Greek God?," 35.
[59] Henrichs, "What Is a Greek God?," 37.
[60] Henrichs, "What Is a Greek God?," 37.
[61] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; London: Routledge, 2002), 117.

world, and to understand their limits, the inconsistencies entailed in them, and the dangers implied in transitions between one and another. It is these dangers and the fears bred by them that point to a god as the one who both generates the danger and has the power to avert it (as we have seen in the case of Athena).

So much for the theoretical assumptions on which I build my conception of the gods. What can we draw from them as regards method? When studying a god, I suggest that we should strive to detect and conceptualize *the boundaries this god protects*. To discover these boundaries, we might ask the following questions.

1. What are the positive norms the god establishes for the worshippers and in what way does he or she transgress them? While the positive functions will largely correspond to what we find in standard historical accounts of Greek divinities, it is the transgressive aspect that is frequently downplayed in these accounts and that deserves our attention—for it is here that a god is required to cover for some deficiencies of the positive norm he or she represents. Moreover, it is precisely the contrast between the normative and the transgressive aspect that defines the boundary we are looking for. In many cases the contrast corresponds to the difference between the ritual image of the god (which tends to stress the god's constructive side) and the image emerging in myths (which frequently depicts the darker aspects as well).

2. What conflicting norms or principles does the god unite in his or her personality? It is this ability to unify contraries that calls for a god, and it is here that we should expect to find the god's essence. Once again, what we are looking for is a boundary that separates the conflicting norms and that only the god is able to cross.

3. What transitions does the god allow his or her worshippers to make? Does he or she play part in any rite of passage? Did he or she make any dangerous passages himself/herself? Does he or she travel to liminal places (such as we have seen in the case of Hera)? If yes, can we detect some connection between these passages and some positive institutions the god is in charge of?

Needless to say, an analysis of this kind cannot be done without first examining the normative system of categories of the society in question. It is only by understanding the norms that we can make sense of their transgressions. At the same time, the method is not meant to replace the traditional procedure of analyzing one by one all the distinct spheres of the god's activity, or the structuralist practice of contrasting the gods to find out their specific "modes of action." Rather, it may be used as a supplement that allows us to fit the results of traditional methods together in a more meaningful way. Once we manage to map both the positive and the transgressive features of the god, we shall be in a better position to identify in a more abstract way the common principle behind a number of the god's spheres of activity that

might at first sight appear as unconnected or even contradictory, thus getting a firmer grasp of the god's "essence."[62]

In some cases, the boundaries in question only emerge once we stop focusing on one single deity and consider the gods together as a system. Thus some of Athena's gender anomalies can be understood only when read as part of the entire process of establishing Zeus's rule. Both Uranos and Kronos tried to stabilize their rule but were overthrown by their sons with the help of the sons' mothers, who detested the forced attempts at stability and tried to set things in motion once again. Zeus is threatened by the same fate (Hesiod, *Theogony* 894–98), but he escapes by swallowing his first wife Metis and giving birth to Athena, who is able to transcend the male–female polarity, in this way avoiding the pitfalls of both male and female extreme solutions. Relating this to the Greek system of gender categories we might speculate that once again Athena is trying to bridge a tension between the strict polarity of male–female roles, which is one of the foundation stones of the system but which in effect is difficult to keep in its strict form.

Before I proceed to my conclusion, it might be useful to compare the gods briefly with another class of beings worshiped by the Greeks: the heroes. They too are human superlatives, acting in ways that transcend the standards of human behavior—not just by accomplishing heroic deeds but frequently also by being extremely stubborn and ferocious to the point of self-destruction, as we can see in Greek tragedies, for example.[63] In this they resemble the gods, but unlike them they are still humans and are thus unable to stand such extreme behavior, meeting tragic end. A good example is Hippolytus, who wanted to be just like Artemis, but being a mortal he was bound to fail. It is precisely this failure that constitutes the essence of the heroic, for even if some heroes have done nothing extreme, their stories are always incomplete: they "die too young," unmarried, or "their work is not done or not recognized. . . . These people have all in one way or another been separated from society and not reintegrated."[64] As a result, heroes are people who have died but have not gone away; they are stuck in a liminal interstate, dead but yet present around their grave. Thanks to this they act as guardians of the threshold, helping or-

[62] While the search for the "essence" of each god has justly been criticized by Detienne and Vernant (*Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, 181), this criticism concerns the attempts of earlier scholars to identify the essence with just one particular "original" domain of the god, reducing other domains to it. For me the essence consists rather in a dynamic network of themes and patterns that is ever open to new developments but that nevertheless retains some unity in the sense that each new historical or local development can be seen as a variation on a structural theme. Compare Pirenne Delforge and Pironti, "Many vs. One." See also my remarks in the conclusion below.

[63] See Bernard M. Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964).

[64] Redfield, *The Locrian Maidens*, 95.

dinary mortals to acknowledge its dangers and draw power from it. While Hippolytus has not managed to reach adulthood, it was at his grave at Troizen that maidens cut their hair before marriage in a rite of separation (Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1424–29), in this way ritually repairing his mythical mistake and obtaining his blessing for their passage to womanhood. In other words, heroes are protectors of boundaries no less than the gods are, but in a different manner: instead of transcending the boundaries, they lay buried on them, provoking humans to complete their unfinished stories. This means that the three above-presented questions should be useful to the study of heroes as well. Indeed, in many cases there will be a close cooperation between a god and a hero, such as we have seen between Athena on the one hand and the daughters of Kekrops and Erichthonios on the other, the latter embodying the danger involved in the foundation of a polis, the former guaranteeing that the danger will be overcome, and all together turning the danger into power. While a god has the advantage of being strong enough to stand all the dangers, a hero has the benefit of being a human like us, which allows him to "draw us in" and present his or her foundational deed as a never completed legacy for future generations to carry on.

CONCLUSION

The aim of my article has been to offer a novel method for understanding Greek gods that builds upon the approach of Jean-Pierre Vernant but adds a new dimension to it. Vernant's approach has been influential but has been frequently criticized for overstressing the systematic aspects of the Greek pantheon and downplaying its numerous local and historical incongruities. While not denying this, I am convinced that if we are to *understand* the gods (as opposed to solely describing them), we have no other possibility than focusing on their orderly aspects, for it is only by being situated in a network of meaningful relationship that a religious fact can become intelligible to an outsider who does not share the religious world in question. Accordingly, I consider Vernant's attempt to read the gods as a system of classification an indispensable part of any modern attempt at making them intelligible. At the same time, however, I agree that Vernant's stress on the orderly side of polytheism is slightly overblown—though in a different regard than that usually considered by his opponents.

What historians of Greek religion usually focus on when criticizing Vernant's passion for the systematic is those disorderly elements that we might describe as *residual chaos*: all the incongruous and heterogeneous elements that arise as a result of contingent historical development and that represent the "raw data" of human experience, so to speak, which are relatively disorderly in themselves and which humans strive to cope with by means of cul-

tural systems of classification. However, since life is always more complex that any system of classification, this ordering effort can never be entirely successful. There will always be various elements that do not fit and that can at best be subsumed under a partial classification system (e.g., by being integrated in a local cult of a god) while being at variance with other classifications available (e.g., with cults of the same god in other cities).

While not denying the reality of this type of chaos, I am trying to draw attention to a chaos of a completely different kind, which we might perhaps call *antistructural chaos* (in the sense introduced by Victor Turner). Whereas residual chaos corresponds to what has not (yet) been ordered, antistructural chaos is rather an inevitable by-product of ordering. It is something that is only produced as a result of the human effort to subsume things under systems of classification, namely whenever these systems start to strike their limits. Antistructural chaos is itself a cultural creation, one that has as its task to secure order by transcending it, in this way supporting it from without. It is my contention that the gods differ from nonreligious classification markers precisely by having an antistructural dimension.

What this implies for analyzing individual gods is that it is only by identifying their antistructural elements that the gods can really make full sense. It is still crucial of course to analyze the positive functions and attributes of each god and try to find a system behind them. However, it is equally important to focus on those aspects of the god that seem to negate the very order he or she helps to establish. Whereas the residual chaotic elements are usually found on the periphery, in the realm of the local and particular, the antistructural elements are to some extent always located in the center and can be spotted even in famous versions of the god's myths and in his or her typical attributes and functions. I believe it is only by taking them into account that we can understand the unifying structural themes that bind all the aspects of the god together. Indeed, it is precisely this unifying ability that can be used as a test that we are on the right track in our attempts to identify the antistructural core of the god in question.

To some extent my method is inspired by psychoanalysis: not in its specific theory of human psyche, but more generally in its conception of symbols as images that allow us to face what has been repressed and is too dangerous to be confronted directly. For me, the repression is not psychological but sociocultural: it has to do with various paradoxes that human cultural orders are bound to produce. From this perspective, the gods may be seen as symbolic foci that a culture generates wherever it reaches its limits, around its dark spots and Achilles' heels. The gods are symbolic images that allow humans to reflect on these darks spots in an indirect manner, so that they may be in touch with them without getting devoured. By relating the gods to these dark spots, the interpreter is able to present them as something that was vital for the

correct functioning of the cultural system, and in this sense to make the modern non-polytheistic reader glimpse something of their indispensability.

An important difference between Freud's perspective and mine lies in the fact that I do not see the content of the repression as something that can easily be translated in etic terms. Rather, it is something that in principle escapes attempts at conceptual understanding, for it represents all the alternative possibilities that have been excluded in the process of ordering and classifying, "the subjunctive depths of liminality," as Victor Turner calls it.[65] In this regard my approach has a surprising affinity with Neoplatonic negative theology, which insists that when speaking about the divine, we do not really speak about the divine as such, but about our own limits face to face with the divine. Since every positive statement inevitably delimits its object, making it incomplete in this way, what is truly transcendent must be unspeakable. "It is a 'potency of all things'[66] that might become anything, but by itself is nothing. Its power comes from the fact that it constantly makes us aware of the limitedness of our human worlds, in this way endangering them but at the same time appearing as the ultimate transcendent source they depend on."[67] At first sight, this may seem as a far cry from traditional Greek polytheism, which was more than willing to speak about the gods in myths and portray them in anthropomorphic images. Yet, once we try to grasp the "essence" of each divinity that unites these images, we can once again only understand it negatively, as a deficiency or gap in the system that the images are meant to fill.[68] This is not to say that we should abandon rational analysis and contemplate the gods in mystical silence. We can still approach the gods by means of the images and rites related to them, as well as by the normative categories supervised by them, and we should strive to detect the deeper structural patterns behind these. I believe, however, that in the end the patterns always consist in some kind of interaction between structure and antistructure, which means that they point beyond themselves, making us aware of the limitedness of our categories.

A crucial feature of my approach is that it allows for understanding polytheistic divinities in a nonreductionist way by conceding them some kind of transcendence while at the same time offering etic conceptual tools for their analysis. This is something normally not easily achieved, for every rational

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[65] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 83.

[66] Plotinus, *Enneads* III 8, 10.1; V 3, 15.33; V 4, 1.36; etc.

[67] Chlup, *Proclus*, 286.

[68] Significantly, the Neoplatonist Proclus had no problem applying negative theology to polytheistic gods, conceptualizing them as "henads" situated at the level of the One, with which they share its unknowability, though unlike it they may be known through their effects. See Chlup, *Proclus*, 61–62, 288–89.

analysis is reductionist in principle, turning gods into concepts and categories, and thus depriving them precisely of those paradoxical and unfathomable features that distinguish religious symbols from rational concepts.[69] My solution to this problem is to postulate a dark, antistructural core in the heart of polytheistic divinities, one that in itself eludes conceptual analysis but can be grasped indirectly at least by tracing certain dynamic drifts in the given cultural system aiming beyond its horizon. In this way one may perhaps convey to the modern reader not just the meaningfulness but even a hint of the power that the Greeks experienced vis-à-vis their gods.

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[69] Ancient allegorical interpretation, which attempted to translate myths into the language of philosophical concepts, illustrates this nicely.