REVISITING ARISTOTELIAN CRITICISM OF EURIPIDES' *DEUS EX MACHINA*

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Abstract

*In assessing Euripides and his tragedies, Aristotle, in his **Poetics**, as well as his modern apologists, generally portrays Euripides as irrational, anachronistic, iconoclastic and anti-traditional. Euripides's use of deus ex machina as a tragic device is particularly condemned on the ground that it serves as a feeble means to resolve complicated plot, thereby rendering the internal economy of his tragedies defective and dramatically disunified. This paper frowns at such condemnation by arguing that Aristotle and his corroborators have been critically unfair to Euripides. To defend Euripides, the paper, through a qualitative content analysis of three Euripidean tragedies: Medea, Hippolytus and Ion, establishes that his deus ex machina was not a contrivance that only resolves complicated and knotty plot; rather, the device was part and parcel of a rational, organic and internal whole plot. From the plots and analyses of the three plays, the paper points out that Euripides intends, among others, that his deus ex machina would always serve as an ironic and satiric device in resolving matters concerning mortals and immortals, especially where no witnesses could arbitrate or testify between them.*

Introduction: The Greek Tragedy
According to Greek tradition, tragedy (*tragoidas* Greek, meaning 'goat song') originated from the ritual ceremony, performed at festivals of the god, Dionysus (Bywater, 1962: 6). At the beginning, the Dionysiac ritual tragedy, in its full form, had six regular parts or stages: (1) The *Agon* or

Contest, (2) The *Pathos* or Disaster, (3) The Messenger, (4) The Lamentation, (5) The Discovery or Recognition and (6) The Epiphany or Resurrection (Murray, 1965: 63). In this paper, we would be more concerned with the last of these parts – the epiphany – which involves the appearance of some divine being, or a resurrection of some dead whose special duty is to bring the action in the plot to a peaceful close (Murray, 1965: 63). Greek tragedy went through many transformations depending on the artistic and aesthetic prowess of the various tragedians. The tragedians themselves more often than not picked a theme from Greek mythology which was the medium of early religious thoughts; the myths or legends, though freely modified for the sake of either moral or dramatic art, were mostly known to many in the audience (Grant, 2013: 29). The tragedians' modifications or transformations of tragedy, however, did not affect the traditional myths or legends in any significant way. Rather, much of the transformations related to plot, style, settings and other internal structures.

By the time of Aristotle, a number of critics had written on various aspects and transformations of Greek literature (Grant, 2013: 29). Aristotle himself wrote extensively on various aspects of literature, particularly in the *Poetics* (Pauw, 1978: 71). The *Poetics,* written between 330 and 323 B.C, discusses four main forms of poetry: epic and lyrical poetry, comedy and tragedy. However, only the last form is treated in detail (Pauw, 1978: 72). Here, he discusses the origin and nature of the genre as practised from early period till his time and offers his views as regards the fundamentals for the most excellent tragedy (Pauw, 1978: 72). Accordingly, Aristotle settles on the Sophoclean tragedy, *King Oedipus,* as the most appropriate representation for tragedy.

The Aristotelian Tragedy
Aristotle, in the *Poetics,* defines tragedy as 'the imitation (*mimesis*) of an action that is serious and also having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in dramatic, not in narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions'(Ross, 1955: 1449b22). Aristotle believes that an excellent tragedy should follow definite rigorous routine. Consequently, he proceeds to outline what it takes to identify a good tragedy. Accordingly, he notes that a good tragedy should aim at representing men, not as inferiors as we have in comedy, but more superior than in actual life. To establish the worth of a tragedy, he summarises that it should inevitably have six interwoven cardinal parts: Plot, Character, Diction, Thought,

Spectacle, and Melody (song) (Ross, 1955: 1452b28-1453b7). Since the main motive of this paper is to concentrate on Aristotle's criticism of Euripides' use of the *deus ex machina,* a device that bears more on the plot, we will not place emphasis on his other tragic elements/parts as we go on with our discussion in this paper.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle considers the Plot ($\mu\theta\tilde{\upsilon}o\varsigma$) not only as the first Principle/Rule ($\dot{\alpha}\rho\chi\dot{\eta}$) of tragedy, but also as its Soul ($\psi\upsilon\chi\dot{\eta}$) (Ross, 1955: 1449b, 1454a-b14). Then, he builds his argument against the use of the *deus ex machina* by showing the difference between a poet and a historian. While a poet relates what may come to pass, a historian communicates what has, in fact, happened. A poet, therefore, relates what is feasible according to the law of possibility or inevitability. This means that elements of the tragic plot that do not relate what is possible, according to the law of probability or inevitability, annihilate the unity of the plot and, for that reason, they ought to belong outside the plot (Ross, 1955: 1454a-b14). This proposal by Aristotle is a calculated endeavour to entirely remove the element of the supernatural from tragedy. How is this possible when the very quintessence of tragedy from early myths comes from the supernatural? Aristotle regards plots and actions as 'episodic' when acts or episodes follow one another and are devoid of a necessary or probable sequence. Episodic plots occur as the consequence of bad poets/dramatists. Good poets, however, make use of episodic plot as a way of pleasing their audience. An episodic plot, Aristotle tells us, even when employed by good poets, stretches the plot beyond its capacity and thus results in breaking the natural continuity of the plot (Butcher, 2006: 1451b).

Aristotle believes strongly in the use of element of surprise in tragedy as a way of intensifying the *anagnorises* (recognition), *peripeteia* (reversal of fortune) and as arousing pity and fear, but he proposes strict procedures. He says, 'many poets are good at complication but handle the resolution badly' (Ryan, 2009: 63). It is instructive to note here that if all tragedies are written per the rule of Aristotle, most of the elements of tragedy will lose their values. Given that tragedy is not only the imitation of a 'complete action' but also of events 'fearful and pitiful', Aristotle asserts that effects of these nature are best produced when the events come as a shock. Consequently, the effects get finely tuned when they occur as 'cause and effect'. What this means is that the tragic nature or effect becomes intense when it occurs voluntarily, and so plots that adhere to these principles are, by rule, the best. A plot, in keeping with Aristotle's view, can be either simple or complex. A plot is simple when the change of fortune occurs unaccompanied by reversal of intention and recognition. This action is one and continuous. On the other hand, a

complex plot occurs when the change is followed by reversal or recognition or both. Most crucially, Aristotle cautions that this change should arise from the internal structure of the plot, in that, what comes later should necessarily or probably result from the preceding action. Since the plot is the first Principle/Rule (ἀρχή) as well as the Soul (ψυχή) of tragedy, a perfect tragedy, according to Aristotle, should then be complex and not simple. Additionally, it should imitate actions which provoke pity and fear (Butcher, 2006: 1452b).

In order for the actions presented in the plot to excite pity and fear, the reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) should not be brought about by the spectacles of a virtuous man falling from prosperity to adversity since this does not arouse pity and fear for it; it only shocks the audience. Similarly, a villain must not be made to rise from adversity to prosperity; this is 'alien to the spirit of tragedy'. Also, the downfall of a complete desperado should not be exhibited. Pity, according to Aristotle, is only aroused by what he terms 'unmerited misfortune', and fear evoked by the misfortune of a man akin to us. Subsequently, this misfortune should be brought about not by 'vice or depravity', but by some 'hamartia or frailty' (Bywater, 1962: 5). The arousal of pity and fear is a cardinal element of tragedy. However, the best way to arouse pity and fear is through the internal structure of the play and not by spectacular means. When pity and fear result from the inner structure of the plot, it allows the audience to tremble with horror without the aid of the eye. It is important to note that not every action evokes pity and fear. It is only when the action occurs between persons who are either friends or enemies or indifferent to one another that pity and fear are aroused. It is only pitiful when an enemy kills an enemy; no fear is aroused here. Aristotle considers a tragedy that accommodates the foregoing to be 'perfect according to the rules of art' (Butcher, 2006:1453). Within the purview of this paper, the question then arises: do the tragic plays of Euripides pass the Aristotelian standards?

It is worthy to submit that Aristotle does not completely disown Euripides' plays; but he avers, like other apologetic critics, that Euripides was the 'most tragic of poets', suggesting that he was careless in the general management of his subject (Butcher, 2006:1453). Again, if we may follow up with the Aristotelian submission above that Euripides was truly the 'most tragic of poets', what then must have accounted for his incompetence in managing his subject? Could it be by design or a clear departure from the artistic prowess and aesthetic tradition of his forebears? Could it be a result of the changing nature of the times – a way of communicating his philosophic ideas to the audience, or simply because he is a non-conformist? Again, the answers to the question and

suggestions, topical as they are, do not fall strictly within the ambits of this paper. Irrespective of the above, it is clear that in the *Poetics,* Aristotle builds his criticism of Euripides so gradually, methodically, and artistically that it becomes difficult for most classical scholars to comprehend the shrouded nature of Aristotle's true motive towards Euripides. But the work is aimed at finding fault with Euripides. Prior to Aristotle's *Poetics,* most fifth-century playwrights considered Euripides as a non-conformist, misogynistic, and profane (Abel, 1954: 128). Subsequently, Aristotle's *Poetics* corroborates as well as justifies the position of those who considered, and still consider, Euripides as the 'killer of tragedy' (Nietzsche, 2007: 80), especially here for his use of the *deus ex machina.* Thus, in what follows, we first briefly explain what the device, termed *deus ex machina,* meant to ancient tragedians. We then attempt a discussion on Aristotle's position on the use of the device, especially by Euripides. In defence of Euripides, we proffer some justifications on the possible reasons for his preferment of the *deus ex machina* in resolving the plots of his tragic plays.

The *Deus Ex Machina* (god from the machine)
This term refers to the practice, in ancient Greek drama, of lowering down a god (i.e. an actor personifying a god) with a crane (*machane*) onto the stage. The god could be any of the Olympian gods or goddesses whose sudden presence was expected to solve the unsolvable and reconcile the irreconcilable. In contemporary times, the term is extended to any unexpected or unforeseen episode that conveys a pleased finish from the remote when the characters have shattered all possibilities of recovering their own fate (Ryan, 2009: 64). Generally, it is a plot device introduced in a play, in form of an implausible concept or divine character, to resolve a rather complicated plot and arrive at a simple and logical conclusion. Literary critics have largely discouraged or condemned the use of the device in a play on the ground that it betrays the plot as ill-structured, deficient, and irrational. The *deus ex machina* is sometimes construed as a facile way to conclude a story, when the author has pinned his characters into a corner by producing a situation that cannot be resolved by natural means (Ryan, 2009: 63).

The *deus ex machina,* for Aristotle, is an unravelling of the plot. For him, the unravelling of the plot must arise out of the plot itself. He states that the device should be employed only for occurrences outside the drama or events beyond the scope of human comprehension which needed only to be reported or foretold, since it is only to the gods that the power of seeing all things is ascribed (Butcher, 2006: 1454b). Aristotle's objection to the device stems from its irrational and arbitrary character

(Ryan, 2009: 63). This is because nothing *irrational* should fall within the plot action. Furthermore, if the *irrational* cannot be excluded, it should be outside the scope of the tragedy as we have in *Oedipus* of Sophocles. In other words, it appears that Aristotle is advising us against the use of the gods or the supernatural in tragedy because most of the *irrational* elements that occur in tragedy are brought about by the introduction of the gods. When a god is made to have a speaking part or role, an *irrational* element is introduced. This, as we shall see, is what Aristotle appears to censure.

Ever since Aristotle ruled out the use of *deus ex machina* on the basis of irrationality, scholars over the years have expressed varied opinions with respect to the use of the device. Many, for instance, opine that a *deus ex machina* is generally deemed undesirable in writing and often implies a lack of originality in the author. The ground for this is that it does not pay due regard to the story's internal logic, and challenges suspension of disbelief, permitting the author to wrap up his story with an improbable, though perhaps more palatable, ending. In his *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche maintains that Euripides often makes use of the *deus ex machina* in form of some divine truthfulness in order to confirm his heroes' future for the public. Nietzsche, like Aristotle, would further argue that the *deus ex machina* creates a false sense of solace that ought not to be sought in phenomena; thus, the device denigrates plot, even in critical opinions (Murray, 1965: 9, Nietzsche, 2007: 80). Like Nietzsche, Haigh (2017) emphasises that the most ordinary occasion for the employment of the device would be when the plot reaches such a complicated condition that only divine interference could put them right again. Haigh implies, in this comment, that the appearance of the *deus ex machina* at the end of a play indicates the playwright's negligence in managing the complications of plot. In the worse cases, Ryan maintains that the device is nothing more than a convenient way to satisfy the reader's need to see the hero suffer and then triumph (Ryan, 2009: 64).

Aristotle's Criticism of the *Deus ex Machina*
In the *Poetics*, Aristotle's problem with the use of the *deus ex machina* has nothing to do with the *stage* at which the device is introduced into a plot. Rather, his objection has to do, in the first instance, with the actual introduction of the device with the aim to resolve a seemingly irresolvable plot (Butcher, 2006: 1454b). When Aristotle wrote the *Poetics,* the great age of Greek tragedy was long past, but he wrote, using the language of his days. As a result, there seemed to be cases where he was affected in his conceptions of 5th century tragedy by the practice of

his own day (last quarter of the fourth century B.C.), when the only living form of drama was the New Comedy. New Comedy (e.g. of Philemon, Diphilus and Menander) is neither tragic nor comic, but, like our own plays, a discreet mixture of both. It has no serious religious or satiric atmosphere of the Old Comedy which parodied and vilified prominent characters in the heyday of Athenian society. Its interest, like ours, is in love and exploit and stratagem. Unlike the early tragedy whose themes were drawn from known myths, the New Comedy turned away from legends and legendary kings and queens; rather, it operated, as we do, with a boldly invented plot and fictitious characters, drawn mostly from everyday life. The New Comedy dominated the later Attic stage and ushered in the Hellenistic and Roman drama (Murray, 1965: 199). Thus, Aristotle erroneously assumes that the various genres such as tragedy, epic poetry, etc. had been in a continued process of development, and that in his time they had acquired their natural and permanent form (Lloyd, 1968: 282). One cannot but suspect that, in his account of the purpose of tragedy, Aristotle may be using an old tradition formula, and, consciously or unconsciously, investing it with a new meaning.

On the use of the *deus ex machina*, some scholars argue that Aristotle himself did not devise techniques for resolution of plots; rather, he only extracted a successful technique from existing Greek literature and laid it down as norm. If this were the case, Aristotle should have appreciated the use of the *deus ex machina* in tragic works since its use goes way back to Homer (in *The Iliad,* Bk. 1, Apollo shoots his arrow among the Achaeans and sets the plot of the epic in motion). In his attempt to introduce his own ideal or standards for tragedies, he ends up criticising the use of the *deus ex machina* in its entirety and calls it *irrational*. For us, we think that someone who is only extracting successful techniques for tragic works from earlier works, as Pauw (1978: 77) would want us to believe, should have seen that the use of the *deus ex machina* has some rational imports, and thus recommend it for unravelling of the plot – a task which can sometimes be quite complex.

As stated in the foregoing, the epiphany or resurrection was the last stage among the six parts of early Greek tragedy. Here, the appearance of some hero or divine being usually brings the plot to a quiet end. This was common at the end of the single plays of Euripides, and it was often similarly so at the end of the trilogies of Aeschylus. In fact, not less than eleven plays of Euripides featured the appearance of a deity generally introduced by means of the *mechane* (crane). This stage of a divinity or epiphany with the aid of *mechane*, sharing the semblances of *deus ex machina,* was not unknown to the critics of Aristotle's days. The

only novel introduction actually, was an improved piece of stage machinery, allowing the god to materialise more successfully. Further, if we try to place ourselves in the minds of fifth century Greeks, there was probably nothing absurd in supposing that the visible appearance of a god in a tragedy was a useless device and a weak means of cutting a knot which a dramatist was unable to untie. The heroes and heroines of tragedy were themselves almost divine; they were all figures in the great myths of the eighth to fifth centuries. They received actual worship. If Oedipus or Orestes or Agamemnon of the Oresteian trilogy should be present on the stage, it would not be surprising that Apollo should appear to them (Murray, 1965: 21). And so, the appearance of a deity was purely to provide information, intervention, or a tidying up of the destinies of characters in a play.

Again, we can assume that Aristotle criticises the use of that epiphany of the god in the *Poetics* perhaps because he was not fully aware of the basic convention or tradition of early Greek tragedy as already implied above; he sees neither the ritual origin nor the dramatic value of these divine epiphanies. He thinks of the convenient gods and abstractions who sometimes speak at the prologues of New Comedy, and imagines that the god appears in order to unravel the plot. As a matter of fact, in one play which he often refers to as ideal and quotes as standard, (the *Iphigenia Taurica*), the plot is actually distorted at the very end in order to give an opportunity for the epiphany of Athena to intervene. From this position, we can argue that the *deus ex machina* is not feebly used to resolve the plot as Aristotle would want us to believe; rather, it is an inherent part of the plot which is never foreign to the whole parts of tragedy. Sometimes, the epiphany of a deity betrays a local or patriotic interest of Euripides.

Only few writers beyond the field of Classical Studies are aware that the widespread view of Aristotle as a spokesman for the Greek literary tradition is manifestly incorrect. Nobody has made this point clearer than Else:

> The sum of the matter is that we cannot tell what proportion of all Greek tragedies exactly fitted Aristotle's prescriptions for the best plot, but it cannot have been more than a small fraction: perhaps as much as a tenth. Among the extant plays the proportion is spectacular: two (*Oedipus Rex* and *Iphigenia Taurica*) out of 32… Actually, I believe that the fact is a damaging one to Aristotle's credit as a critic, no matter how one looks at it. His principles, which with his characteristic logic he has pushed to a radical conclusion, have led him into a *cul de*

sac. They were based, too narrowly to begin with, on his exaggerated and one-sided thesis of the overwhelming importance of plot as against all other elements; and their interlocking into the tight nexus we have described had the result of narrowing his scope still more … It so happened that the knife-edge of his judgement hit square on one masterpiece, the *Oedipus*; but the other play it hit upon, the *Iphigenia*, cannot honestly be called much more than a good melodrama, and meanwhile masterpieces like the *Trojan Women* or the *Bacchae*, to say nothing of the *Oedipus at Colonus* or the *Agamemnon*, remain outside the range of Aristotle's formula. This is not the way one can arrive at an organic comprehension of the best of Greek drama. (Else, 1957: 446).

Euripides' Use of the *Deus Ex Machina*
It is now convenient here to highlight how Euripides practically made use of the *deus ex machina* in some of his plays. It is important to reiterate that Euripides, among his contemporaries, was not the only one who frequently used the device in his plays. Aeschylus habitually used divine epiphany. However, in line with the last stage of the parts of the Greek tragedy, he generally kept it for the last play of a trilogy. That he often had a whole galaxy of gods, and that, with some exceptions, his gods walked the floor of the earth with the other actors, shows that he was probably the mastermind of the *deus ex machina.* However, of all the three greatest Greek tragedians, Euripides was the most renowned for the mastery of the *deus ex machina.* His plays to be considered are: *Medea, Hippolytus* and *Ion*.

Medea
First and foremost, it is important to note, in the *Medea*, that the marriage between Medea and Jason is set in motion by the gods, and this is central to the understanding of the play. The play centres on Medea, who vows a terrible revenge against her husband, Jason, after he deserts her and marries another woman, Glauce, the daughter of Creon. Medea's resentment increases further when Creon, hearing of her vow, orders her and her children to be banished from Corinth. Slyly, with a plan already in mind, Medea persuades Creon, the Corinthian King, to allow her just one day longer to prepare herself and her children for the journey. She feels that revenge will be sweeter with Jason living to suffer long afterward. Nothing is more painful than to grow old without a lover, without children, and without friends, and so Medea plans to kill the king, Creon, his daughter, Glauce, and her own children. She summons

Jason and pretends that she forgives him for what he has done in marrying Glauce. She begs that she be allowed to send her children with gifts to the new bride, as a sign of her repentance. Jason is completely deceived by her supposed change of heart, and gives his approval. Medea sends her sons to deliver a beautiful dress to Jason's new wife, Glauce. However, the dress is laced with poison, and while Glauce was dying, Creon rushes in and sees his daughter writhing on the floor, he attempts to lift her, but is himself contaminated by the poison; both eventually die. Meanwhile. the children have returned to Medea. As she looks at them and feels their arms around her, she is torn between her love for them and her hatred for Jason; between her desire for revenge and the commands of her maternal instinct. The barbarous part of her nature – Medea being not a Greek, but a barbarian from Colchis – triumphs. Jason fears that his sons will be blamed for Glauce's death. He rushes to Medea's home to protect his sons, but is horrified to discover that Medea has already killed them. Medea denies Jason's request to see his sons' bodies and instead flies away in a magical chariot (*enotes.com/topics/Medea*).

One of the deductions from the summary of *Medea* above is that Medea was superhuman, 'a wizard, possessed of evil knowledge' (Hadas & McLean, 1985: trans. *Medea,* 283-328) who employed magic, (*irrational* powers) to help Jason overcome all his troubles while he sought for the golden fleece (Hadas & McLean, 1985: trans. *Medea,* 478-526). This active feature of magic was an evidence of the *deus ex machina.* The mere narration above reveals that, once the gods begin something, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to keep the same gods out. Medea says:

> I saved your life, as all know who embarked
> with you on the Argo, who you were sent to
> master with the yoke the fire-breathing bulls
> and to sow with dragon's teeth that acre of
> death. The dragons too with wreathed coils,
> that kept safe watch over the Golden Fleece
> and never slept – I slew it and raised for you
> the light of life again (Hadas & McLean,
> 1985: trans. *Medea,* 478-526).

Medea was able to raise Jason from the dead, although she suffered desertion from the man. Towards the end of the play, after all her heinous massacres, she still escapes from Corinth by a magical chariot. If Medea could employ magical powers to aid Jason's success, then

without any questioning, it would be illogical for her to be unable to protect and prevent herself from coming into harm. What then can she not do to escape death herself?

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Euripides' use of the *deus ex machina* in the *Medea* is not the result of solving an unsolvable problem that he has created. For instance, prior to Medea's escape by the use of 'chariot drawn by winged dragons', she had had an agreement with Aegeus, King of Athens, for asylum (Hadas & McLean, 1985: trans. *Medea,* 696-736). Nothing really prevents Euripides from allowing Medea to stealthily sneak into the cargo of Aegeus to escape, so to say, thereby, in Aristotle's ideal way, bringing the play to a *rational* end. As rational as this would have appeared, it would have defeated other purposes, which Euripides, perhaps, had in mind for the introduction of the device. Also, Medea had, on countless occasions, called on the gods to be witnesses to the inhumane treatment brought on her by Jason (Hadas & McLean, 1985: trans. *Medea,* 1313-1357). Homer, as noted above, uses similar intervention in *The Iliad* when he allows Apollo to kill the Achaeans for the maltreatment meted out to Chryses by Agamemnon (*The Iliad*, 1: 22-52) The god of justice, Zeus, is also invoked by Medea, so any attempt to either allow Medea to be caught and punished for her actions or escape without being noticed would have been a loss for Zeus (Hadas, M., & McLean, J.1985: 737-783). These instances of the appearances or intervention of the divine/magical are clear evidence that the *deus ex machina,* for Euripides, meant something much more than Aristotle could fathom.

Again, we see that Jason attributes Medea's first deep affection for him to a god, Eros, not to love or freewill. He remarks, 'Eros, with his unerring arrows, forced you to save my body' (Hadas, M., & McLean, J., 1985: 527-570). As evidenced in many Greek tragedies, the statement of Jason reveals how the gods intervene in the affairs of men – a kind of *deus ex machina.* If we should go by the position of Cowherd (1983: 130), that by the use of the device, Euripides satirises the activities of men, then, it is important to note by the statement of Jason (that Eros compels Medea to save him and subsequently fall in love with him) that Euripides uses the *deus ex machina* to satirise the activities of both men and the gods. Why should Aristotle be surprised that Euripides had used the device to resolve the affairs of both mortals and immortals? Does he expect men to resolve what the gods have set in motion? Certainly not.

Finally, Euripides uses the *deus ex machina* in the *Medea* so that his audience would feel relieved on the one hand, and have a sense of victory and vindication for the wrongs done to Medea, on the other hand.

Medea's escape can be described as 'triumph.' If there was no divine intervention, there was no way Jason or the people of Corinth would allow Medea to go into exile or stay in Corinth to carry out the heinous crimes she committed. This shows that, in the *Medea,* the *deus ex machina* was employed, irrespective of Aristotle's claim of its *irrationality,* to demonstrate that you cannot spurn, desert, maltreat or betray genuine love and go unpunished. Yes, it is true that some scholars will argue that Medea, by killing her own sons, has gone too far. But the truth is that both Medea and Jason will forever live in pain for their actions; after all, the massacre is the source upon which the tragic effect is aroused. Therefore, anything less than the introduction of the *deus ex machina* would have been double victory for Jason but two-fold agony for Medea. The grand question to ask is whether or not the use of the *deus ex machina* in the *Medea* takes away the object of tragedy, which has been identified by Aristotle as 'the arousal of the emotions of pity and fear'. In fact, Euripides' artistic use of the device in the *Medea* rather ensures that the arousal of the emotions of pity and fear is realised.

Hippolytus

The *Hippolytus* is the story of a mortal prince, Hippolytus, who prefers chastity and hunting to the pursuits under the goddess Aphrodite's purview. He worships Artemis, goddess of the hunt and virginity, to the exclusion of Aphrodite, goddess of love. The goddess, who is furious at this slight and desertion, avenges by causing Hippolytus' stepmother, Phaedra, to fall in love with him. When the horrified Hippolytus rejects Phaedra's overtures, she hangs herself out of shame, but not before leaving a letter accusing her stepson of raping her. Upon reading the note, Hippolytus' father, King Theseus, curses his son, which leads to Hippolytus' death. In the last scene, Artemis, the goddess whom Hippolytus adores, appears to comfort her dying devotee, and to reveal the truth to Theseus. Before she vanishes, Artemis promises to avenge Hippolytus' death by inflicting a comparable punishment on Aphrodite's next mortal favourite (*enotes.com/topics/Hippolytus*).

Right from the first scene, *Hippolytus* opens with Aphrodite appearing on the platform reserved for gods. She complains of how Hippolytus has neglected her worship because he considers her as 'the vilest of divinities', but honours Artemis and 'thinks her the greatest of goddesses' (Hadas, M., & McLean, 1985: *Hippolytus*, 1-25). Consequently, Aphrodite resolves:

> It is his sinful neglect of me for which I shall
> punish Hippolytus this very day. The ground

> was prepared long ago: there is not much left for me to do. Once, he was going from Pitheus' house to the land of Pandio to see the Mysteries and be initiated, his father's noble wife, Phaedra, saw him, and her heart was smitten with a fearful love – all by my scheming (Hadas, M., & McLean, 1985: *Hippolytus*, 1-25).

Once again, it is clear from the foregoing that, since an immortal has been brought in to set this plot into motion, it is only rational to employ the services of the immortal (*deus* - a god, the divine) in resolving the plot. Euripides makes several important innovations here; first, his view of the gods is not at all the same as that found in traditional Greek religion. Aphrodite and Artemis, although they appear on stage in human form, are largely personifications of lust and chastity. It is the conflict between these competing forces that brings about the destruction of Phaedra and Hippolytus; the inability of these characters to find a balance between the desires represented by Aphrodite and the goals represented by Artemis destroys them (*enotes.com/topics/Hippolytus*). In any case, there was no way Artemis would sit on the fence for Aphrodite to do damage to Hippolytus.

After Theseus has unjustly 'slain' Hippolytus for making overtures to his wife, Euripides employs the *deus ex machina* (epiphany of Artemis) to resolve the complications of the plot by revealing the truth and exposing the ignorance of Theseus. Euripides could have used Phaedra's Nurse or the Leader to reveal the ills of Phaedra and quietly resolve the plot. But to what extent would Theseus believe them? An immortal has tied the knot of this plot so it is just apt that an immortal should unravel the plot as well. Artemis blames no mortal, but the gods:

> Unwittingly did you destroy him.
> It is but natural for humans to err when gods put it in their way. And you I bid, Hippolytus, not to hate your father (Hadas, M., & McLean, 1985: *Hippolytus*, 1403-1441).

This departing speech by Artemis sums up the essence of the *deus ex machina* in this instance. Euripides wants his audience to understand that, when gods interfere in the affairs of men, it takes only a god to correct the wrong in order to bring about lasting peace. This image of the gods is not at all flattering. Aphrodite uses Phaedra as a pawn to achieve

the vengeance that she desires against Hippolytus. Humankind is seen to be mere toys in the hands of the gods, subject to their whims, and unable to escape the destiny that they have imposed. Yet, since the gods are presented wih human emotions in this drama, Euripides is not being fatalistic in the traditional sense. Rather, the playwright is implying, even as the philosophers of his day had suggested, that humanity is the victim of its own passions and conflicting desires. In the end, it is human emotion, not destiny, which brings about suffering in *Hippolytus* (*enotes.com/topics/Hippolytus*)*.* Just as in *Medea*, the *deus ex machina* was employed here by Euripides to demonstrate that when, out of jealousy, one god decides to ruin the faithful follower of another god, it takes a god to exact vengeance and not a human. This is why Artemis unequivocally declares:

> With these arrows of mine from which there
> is no escape I will wreck vengeance, with my
> own hand, upon another mortal whoever is
> most dear to her
> (Hadas, M., & McLean, 1985: *Hippolytus*,
> 1403-1441).

Once again, the *deus ex machina* used by Euripides in the *Hippolytus* efficiently tidies up the loose ends of the plot. Theseus is made to know his ignorance, Hippolytus his innocence, Phaedra her scheming orchestrated by Aphrodite, and what the future beholds. Clearly, the use of the *deus ex machina* does not mar the plot in any form or nature as the main object of tragedy, 'the arousal of the emotions of pity and fear', is still achieved.

Ion

Euripides' *Ion* begins with appearance of the messenger god, Hermes, narrating the plot of the story to the audience, which is as follows: Phoebus Apollo has had an affair with a mortal woman, Creusa, who, in secret, bears a son, Ion. Creusa, fearing the punishment of her father, King Erectheus, and obeying the command of Apollo, leaves the son in a basket in a cave, expecting he would die. Hermes is sent to carry the infant to the temple of Apollo. There, he is reared as a temple ministrant. Meanwhile, Creusa has married Xuthus as a reward for his aid of the Athenians in their war against the Euboeans, but the marriage remains without a child. After years of frustration, Xuthus and Creusa decide to go to the temple of Apollo at Delphi to seek the aid of the oracle/god in getting a child.

The action of the play picks up where Ion appears, sweeping the temple. While Xuthus is inside the chamber consulting the oracle, Creusa and Ion meet. During their discussion, Ion explains that his own birth is shrouded in mystery, for he appeared out of nowhere at the temple and was reared by the priestess of Apollo. The greatest sorrow of his life, he says, is not knowing who his mother is. Creusa sympathises and cautiously reveals that she has a friend with a similar problem; a woman bore a son to Apollo, but was forced to expose him and to suffer childlessness for the rest of her life. Ion, shocked and outraged at the insult to his god, demands that Creusa end her accusation of Apollo in his own temple, but the anguished woman assails the god with fresh charges of injustice, breaking off only at the arrival of her husband, Xuthus, who, after consulting the oracle, immediately adopts Ion as a son. Creusa is angry because she assumes that Ion is Xuthus's son by a slave woman. She plots to have a tutor poison Ion, but the plot is revealed when a bird accidentally drinks his poisoned wine at a banquet. Creusa is incriminated by the tutor. But later, she realises that Ion is her son when she sees the basket in which she had exposed him and which Ion brings to Athens from the temple. The priestess of Apollo had given it to him when he departed the temple. Once she recognises him, Creusa embraces Ion as her son. However, she has to convince him by means of identifying the contents of the basket (a weaving of a Gorgon's head, a pair of serpents, and an olive branch) without looking inside it. After the revelation, Athena appears to the duo to confirm the truth that Apollo (and not Xuthus) is, in fact, Ion's father, but they all agree to keep the secret from Xuthus (*https://www.enotes.com/topics/ion-euripides*).

In the plot briefly summarised above, the *Ion* should have ended at the point when Creusa identifies her son. However, Creusa's claims must be authenticated (Phoebus mated Creusa in a cave). Who would testify as a witness to an incident which no mortal could see and live? Which mortal could testify in matters concerning a mortal and an immortal? Who is best to do this but a god in order to bring a lasting peace? Thus, it behoves on Euripides to rely on his powerful plot device, the *deus ex machina,* to bring about that much desired peace. Athena is, therefore, sent by Apollo to intervene on his behalf (Hadas, M., & McLean, J. 1985: 1526-1566). The characters in the play remain in the dark until the appearance of Athena at the end of the play. This ignorance of the characters creates a perfect dramatic irony for the audience, for everyone is blind to the purpose of Olympus.

The revelation of Athena is neither preposterous nor paradoxical, but the indispensable realisation of the objective which sets the whole plot in motion. The revelation of Hermes in the prologue also creates an

artistic irony as well as suspense which makes the audience to be on their toes for the arrival of Athena; Ion and Creusa even display their ignorance due to their misconception of the will of the gods. We cannot, therefore, refer to Athena's intervention as *irrational* as well as an attempt to resolve the seemingly irresolvable, as Aristotle would have asserted. It is obvious from Euripides' use of the *deus ex machina* in the *Ion* that he clearly had a motive and this motive could only be achieved through the use of this artistic mechanism. *Ion* seems to be a demonstration of how the fifth century Athenian, out of over-reliance on human prowess, turned to misunderstand the role of the gods in their lives (Abel, 1954: 129-130).

The use of this plot device also reveals the root of the Ionians. It also unites Creusa and Apollo by allowing Creusa to praise Phoebus, whom she has earlier blamed for neglecting her for many years:

> I praise Phoebus whom I did not praise before because he is restoring to me the child he once neglected. (Hadas, M., & McLean, J. 1985: *Ion*, 1567-1615).

> Hail Apollo, child of Zeus and Leto! He whose house is vexed by misfortunes ought to revere the deities and be of good courage! For, at the last, the good shall attain their deserts, but the evil, as their nature is, will never fare well (Hadas, M., & McLean, J. 1985: *Ion*, 1616-1623).

It is as a result of this plot device that the Chorus end the play by reminding us all that mortals need to maintain good relationship with the immortals.

Euripides' Use of The *Deus Ex Machina*: Additional Justifications
It is now convenient at this point, and in view of the representative plays analysed above, to string together other possible reasons for the use of *deus ex machina* in the plays of Euripides. A critical observation of the tragedies of Euripides, especially those that feature the *deus ex machina,* reveals that many of his plays end on a seemingly happy note. This might appear a bit unusual to modern readers to whom tragedy denotes a drama ending in misfortune. To be candid, the Greeks generally held the personalities of the immortals in high esteem. The great reverence for the Olympian gods permeates all the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles. But

by the time of Euripides, the Athenians, as noted above, had begun to neglect, or even rule out completely, the essence of the gods in their daily lives. They saw the prosperity of their state as solely the effort of men and ignored the role of the divine.

A clear example of this secularism could be seen in Pericles' Funeral Oration (Thucydides, 2.34 - 46). This speech was delivered during the days of Euripides. Pericles, the Athenian statesman, was so clear in this Oration in his neglect of the role of the gods in the feat attained by the Athenian Empire. He was, however, very loud in acknowledging the roles of the citizens in Athens' rise to prominence. According to Pericles, citizens 'are restrained from lawlessness chiefly through reverend fear.' This supposed 'reverend fear' is not the fear of the gods but of the laws (Thucydides, 2.34 – 46; Abel, 1985: 127). If this Funeral Oration is the best picture we have of fifth century Athens as seen through the eyes of her greatest contemporary statesman, Pericles, then there is no place for the gods or religion in the philosophy of Periclean statecraft. This implies that even festivals and games that were hitherto organised in honour of the gods, according to Pericles, were nothing but means of 'relaxation' (Thucydides, 2.34 - 46).

> We have provided for the spirit many relaxations from toil; we have games and sacrifices regularly throughout the year (Thucydides, 2.38).

These were only splendid shows and there was no mention of divine direction, aid or inspiration, in the speech. Thus, a nation that was full of self-sufficient men became utterly egocentric in attitude thereby depending on the material and the secular, at the expense of the spiritual and religious sides of men (Abel, 1954: 127). This imbalance appears to be what the Euripidean *deus ex machina* seeks to correct.

Unlike the days of Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides, in his time, believes that the affairs of the gods should be left within the domains of the divine, even though he uses freely both mortal and immortal characters in developing his plots. He thinks that 'the proper study of mankind is man,' as opposed to the views of early Athenians (Abel, 1954: 128). Although the acts of the gods (*deus ex machina*) form a central and irremovable part of Euripides' plots, he clearly often satirises the conventional notion of the gods. When it comes to satirising the orthodox and conventional views of the gods, how best could one present it in a tragedy if not through the exact means by which the gods are believed to operate? The gods appear and disappear at will without

being questioned. They are believed to favour or punish whomsoever they deem fit without being questioned. Even in the Homeric poems, they interfere in the affairs of men as and when they like, causing feuds, settling misunderstandings, supporting chosen folks and setting states, families, and loved ones apart (e.g. Homer, *the Iliad,* 1.41-50). Euripides, in one vein, is perhaps only saying that it is important that when the gods that we revere so much interfere in the affairs of men, they should equally be allowed to resolve whatever chaos they might have caused. This means that, if men are held responsible for their actions, the gods too should not be exempt. If it is true that the gods are always on the side of the victorious party, then the gods should not be seen to be tempting the weaker party into war only to allow them to be annihilated by the stronger (Abel, 1954: 129).

Thus, it is important to note that many ideas (especially here, the *deus ex machina*) presented by Euripides in his plays are not entirely his personal opinions, but rather complimentary of the existing notions of his days about the Olympian gods. Therefore, the use of the *deus ex machina* cannot be seen either as a *purple patch* or *irrational* element but an integral and irremovable part of the whole play (Abel, 1954: 129). Abel corroborates this allusion by stating that 'no effect can be greater than its cause; therefore, the effect is that *deus ex machina* often results from a *deus ex initio* (god from the beginning) (1954: 129). The validity of this assertion can be seen from two of the plays summarised above – *Hippolytus* and *Ion* – which have the gods weaving the actions necessitating the introduction of the *deus ex machina*. The question that comes to mind on reading these plays is: when the gods start an action, why shouldn't they finish it? This, however, implies that when the difficulties faced by the characters are brought about by the meddling in, and machinations of, the gods, then it is only appropriate, for the unity of the plot, that the gods are brought back, by one way or the other, to resolve their own problems. For instance, in the *Oresteian* trilogy, if it is rational for Apollo to advise Orestes to kill his mother, then it is equally rational and also prudent, for the purposes of the unity of the plot, to invite the gods to protect Orestes from the hands of the vengeful Erinyes spirits who are bent on taking his life. Thus, if Euripides is not satirising the activities of man, then he is satirising the acts of the gods through the use of the *deus ex machina,* and showing that he is a man of faith, as opposed to being a cynic (Abel, 1954: 130).

Conclusion
There is no doubt from the foregoing that Aristotle has, in the *Poetics*, provided us a deeper understanding into the workings of a better plot

construction, the ultimate being that it must have the ability to resolve its problems internally, without the introduction of extraneous materials such as the *irrational* element, *deus ex machina*. Justifiably, one may be tempted to consider the Aristotelian standards of a well-constructed tragic plot in dissecting Euripides' application of the *deus ex machina*. However, Euripides' continual application of the *deus ex machina* in the resolution of the complications or problems of his plots makes him an authority in its application. Euripides, to reiterate, precedes Aristotle in chronology; the latter, then, could have benefited first hand from the hindsight of the former in respect of actual technicalities and materials of fifth century tragedy. Euripides, as we have seen, uses the *deus ex machina* for various reasons: to resolve plot issues, to provide divine criticism, approval, disapproval and insight into mankind and its actions, to emphasise man's subjectivity to the wills of the gods in whose hands he is just a tool, to show the connection between humans and gods, and to show the extent of the powers of the Greek deities. His use of the device supplies an element of spectacle. His deities are to be regarded as a dramatic convenience providing, in addition, a little incidental spectacle. If Euripides intends the *deus ex machina* to perform all these, why should the device be expunged from the plot?

The problem with Aristotle's condemnation of the Euripidean *deus ex machina,* as shown above, is that the device should not have been outrightly employed in the first place. He does not even give room for how effective or to what extent the device could be used. His inability to also examine the purpose of the *deus ex machina,* especially in relation to the fifth century Athenian individualistic and self-sufficiency mentality, makes his condemnation a bit problematic. Certainly, if one takes the *Poetics* as a manual of rules for poetry and drama, one would find it either misleading or deficient. Perhaps, what Aristotle should have said was that he does not fully subscribe to poets/dramatists who use the *deus ex machina,* rather than emphasise its total condemnation or exclusion in well-constructed plots. Aristotle and his apologists would need to accept the view that the *deus ex machina* has become an integral part of a well-constructed plot; rather than create disunity or negatively affect the internal economy of plots, the device, when expertly exploited by seasoned dramatists, makes the plot organic, satiric and satisfying. Indeed, Euripides' distinction in the use of the device makes him an authority that Aristotle should have applauded instead of being condemned. This paper is not in any way arguing that the *deus ex machina* should be the standard rule of untying knotty plot or ending a tragedy. It has only suggested that when literary critics imaginatively look beyond the commonplace, they can find in the *irrational* element

(*deus ex machina)* a very rational and exceptional beauty/device, capable of resolving the unresolvable. It is on account of the foregoing that we conclude that Aristotle was not absolutely right in his condemnation of Euripides.

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