

Greek accounts of divine epiphanies balance the presence of the gods with their otherness through a variety of means. The primary way in which this balance is achieved is through the multifaceted nature of Greek epiphany narratives, it is never apparent whether or not you are facing a god or not. This balance is also achieved by the emphasis placed on the power of the gods in epiphany narratives and the danger that is inherent to them. The deceptive nature of the gods also contributes to achieving this balance. These factors leave epiphany narratives as ambitious encounters with the gods, that allow for the gods to be both present and distant simultaneously.

Epiphany narratives are multifaceted and diverse, the gods come in many shapes and sizes. Petridou identifies seven distinct forms of epiphany, each of these forms of epiphany are different from each other and reveals different aspects of a god's power.¹ The fact that epiphanies can take so many different forms means that there may never be a moment when a god could not be present in the Greek world. One of the forms that Petridou identifies is anthropomorphic epiphanies. In these epiphanies, a god takes the form of a human and interacts with the mortal world. Gods may be separate from humans in most ways but not in appearance.² This form of epiphany can be seen in Homeric hymns to Demeter and Aphrodite in which they both take on the appearance of mortal women to engage with humans. In this form, gods are disguised as humans but they do not appear fully human. There is tension between the divine form and the human body.³ Gods can never fully appear as humans, their bodies are always better than those of regular mortals. They are taller, more beautiful, and more majestic than the mortals that they are engaging with. There is an inherent power in their bodies even as mortals.⁴ This tension between the human form that the gods have adopted and their natural power emphasises their otherness from humans. They may be engaging with mortals and even look like them but they can never be like them. There will always be a disconnect between the world of the divine and the world of mortals. The tension between the divine and mortal can make it possible to work out if someone is a god. This can be seen with Anchises in the hymn to Aphrodite where he correctly works out that she is a god. Due to her 'height and shining garments' he is able to deduce that she is a god and even suggests that she may be Aphrodite. Aphrodite denies this and Anchises accepts the denial. This interaction shows that lines can be blurred between human form and divine form. This can also lead to false positives as well, due to the blurring of forms. Herodotus introduces the possibility that epiphanies can be faked.⁵ This

¹ Georgia Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 29.

² Henk Versnel, 'What Did Ancient Man See When He Saw a God?', in *Part of Effigies Dei: Essays on the History of Religions*, ed. Dirk Van der Plas (New York: Brill, 1987), 43.

³ Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture*, 35.

⁴ Petridou, 39.

⁵ Fritz Graf, 'Trick or Treat? On Collective Epiphanies in Antiquity', *Illinois Classical Studies* 29 (2004): 117.

can be seen in the Phye incident in which a local woman is dressed up as Athena and this is believed by the Athenians, bringing about the return of the tyrant Pisistratus. Therefore, even when someone who appears to have divine power is seen they may still just be a mortal. When the gods take human form you can never be truly sure if they are a god or not.⁶ Even when the gods are perceived to be present it may not be true. In anthropomorphic epiphanies, there will always be an element of unknowability even when the gods are seen to be present.

The otherness of the gods can also be seen in the fact that they can take forms other than those of humans. As discussed Petridou identifies seven forms of epiphany, anthropomorphism is only one of these seven. For instance, gods can take the form of animals, performances, statues, phantoms, and even representations of their power.⁷ Statue and performance epiphanies will be discussed later, but the other forms of epiphany continue to show the ambiguity of epiphany. The multifaceted forms that gods can physically take on further show that you can never be sure when you are interacting with a god. Animals can both be gods in another form and signifiers of their power.⁸ For example, the use of snakes in the worship of Asclepius. When Asclepius is brought into a new city it is in the form of a snake, snakes are also important in healing narratives in Epidaurus.⁹ In the testimonia narratives from Epidaurus, snakes can perform the same healing functions as Asclepius. For example, one narrative talks of a man who is healed when a snake licks his toe, and another speaks of a woman who is able to have children after having sex with a snake.¹⁰ It is not clear if the snakes are representations of Asclepius or his divine presence in the form of an animal, all that is clear is the presence of his power.¹¹ Therefore when facing divine animals it is never made clear if the god is present or if it is just a manifestation of their power. This emphasises their distance from humanity as due to the variety of forms you can never be sure of their true presence. The gods are still accessible however as their sacred animals can be in the presence of mortals.

Epiphanies can also take the form of the power of the gods being manifested. In historical narratives such as those of Herodotus miraculous events such as storms are viewed as epiphanies. One such event is the repulse of the Persians from Delphi in the Persian War. In this narrative multiple miraculous events take place to show the gods' support of the Greeks in their conflict with the

⁶ Albert Henrichs, 'What Is A Greek God?', in *The Gods of Ancient Greece: Identities and Transformations*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Andrew Erskine (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 34.

⁷ Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture*, 29.

⁸ Petridou, 91.

⁹ Georgia Petridou, 'Asclepius the Divine Healer, Asclepius the Divine Physician: Epiphanies as Diagnostic and Therapeutic Tools', in *Medicine and Healing in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Demetrios Michaelides (Oxbow Books, 2014), 298.

¹⁰ Epidaurus Testimonia Stele A xvii and Stele B 42

¹¹ Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture*, 93.

Persians. One of these events is a landslide caused by thunderbolts that overwhelm many Persians. These events are manifestations of the power of the gods in the form of natural disasters.¹² The form that the gods are adopting in these situations is the form of power. They do not need to adopt a physical form to be present in the world of mortals. Gods can participate in the world of humans and have real tangible impacts on that world while also taking a form that is completely alien to humans. Their presence is immediate and concrete and yet they are also shown to be completely other and unknowable to humans. Overall, the multifaceted nature of epiphany brings humans into close and immediate contact with the gods while also showing the deep divide between the mortal and immortal spheres.

Ambiguity is further embedded in epiphany narratives as there is confusion over whether a representation of a god is the appearance of a god. This ambiguity is seen in both physical and oral representations of gods. Statues of the gods are never simply just statues.¹³ Statues are both physical objects and the divine simultaneously. The lines between object and divine are therefore blurred. This can be seen through the fact that the Spartan military would carry cult icons of the Polydeukes with them on campaign.¹⁴ This would bring the power and favour of the Heroes with them into battle, to ensure their victory. These icons are therefore both representations and invocations of the divine figures. Statues are vessels for divine power. Statues can perform acts that are outside of plausibility for a regular religious icon. They can appear as living statues, able to talk, walk and engage with mortals.¹⁵ Even in situations such as these, where statues are imbued with power, it is still unclear if it is the power of a god animating the statue or a god possessing the statue with their presence.¹⁶ This creates ambiguity within these statue narratives as it is unclear if a god is truly present. A god may be acting through the statue and thus is present in some respect but mortals will never know if it is truly the god or just a representation. The ambiguity of representation can also be seen in Epic and Hymns. Epic narratives begin with an invocation of the muses, the poetic divinities are called upon to allow the poet to tell the story. The poet is therefore given a connection to the gods, a conduit through which these divine narratives can reach regular mortals.¹⁷ Telling these stories about the gods and their interactions with mortals brings them immediately present to humans, distance is also preserved as these stories themselves show the divides between

¹² Graf, 'Trick or Treat?', 120.

¹³ Verity Platt, *Facing the Gods, Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 50.

¹⁴ W. Kendrick Pritchett, *The Greek State at War, Part III: Religion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 14.

¹⁵ Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture*, 50.

¹⁶ Petridou, 51.

¹⁷ Daniel Turkeltaub, 'Perceiving Iliadic Gods', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 103 (2007): 76.

the humans and gods and the dangers that come about from interacting with them. Representations of the gods can be understood as epiphanies as they bring the gods into contact with mortals. These forms of epiphanies can provide direct contact with the gods while also maintaining ambiguity about the presence and reinforcing the power divides between humans and the gods. In religious and personal contexts the gods are constantly evoked and their power may be called upon, but their real presence is never certain. Therefore, gods are both present and distant.

Overall, epiphanies are highly ambiguous. You can never be sure whether you are facing a god or not and even if you are seeing something that you perceive to be a god it may not be a god and instead may be a manifestation of a god's power. The Greek world is full of gods and they are always present but there is also always uncertainty and distance between humans and the gods, they are always unknowable.

A further element of epiphany narratives that shows the balance between the presence and otherness of the gods is the emphasis that is placed on their power. Epiphany should be understood as both the appearance of the divine and the miraculous deeds performed by the divine.¹⁸ Epiphanies are a flex of a god's power, it is how gods show their power to mortals.¹⁹ In the epiphany narratives so far discussed this power can be seen. Gods send storms and natural disasters, and gods heal the sick through their dreams.²⁰ The power of the gods is also seen in the fact that epiphanies are viewed as dangerous. Unmediated encounters with the gods are dangerous to mortals, as the pure raw power of the gods can kill mortals, as happens with Semele when Zeus shows her his true form.²¹ Without these elements of power, epiphanies would be without majesty, gods must appear with power or they are not gods.²² This centrality of power balances the action of the gods with their otherness. This is because it shows that the gods can do anything, including help mortals in times of crisis or animate statues. This means that they are immediately present in the affairs of mortals and able to act in the world of mortals. However, it also emphasizes their otherness and distance from humans as it shows how far beyond simple human concerns they are and how elevated they are above mortals.

¹⁸ Versnel, 'What Did Ancient Man See When He Saw a God?', 52.

¹⁹ Henrichs, 'What Is A Greek God?', 36.

²⁰ Petridou, 'Asclepius the Divine Healer, Asclepius the Divine Physician', 297.

²¹ Henrichs, 'What Is A Greek God?', 19.

²² Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture*, 38.

A further way in which the presence and otherness of the gods are balanced in epiphany narratives is through the characters of the gods themselves. The gods themselves are deceptive in epiphany narratives. In the Homeric Hymns to Aphrodite and Demeter both of those goddesses actively disguise their divinity from humans. They also hide their plans from the mortals around them. Aphrodite for example actively lies to Anchises about her divinity before they have sex after he correctly guesses her identity. Demeter also conceals her designs from mortals, not explaining her plan for Demophoon's immortality to Metaneira the child's mother. Demeter gets angry that a mortal would get scared at seeing their own child in the flames. Even in the Iliad gods hide from heroes.²³ Other than Achilles no hero is able to see the gods at all times. Diomedes is only able to see the gods when Athena their concealment from his eyes. From these stories, it can be seen that the gods actively do not want mortals to know their plans. The gods are presented as inherently deceptive beings, almost always hiding their true identity from humans. This links back to the ambiguity of epiphanies discussed earlier. Gods can take multiple forms as discussed and they can even lie about their form to mortals. Gods cannot be trusted in epiphany narratives. Even when gods are present they still cannot be truly known by mortals. Their presence cannot be fully understood and nor can their intentions.

Overall, epiphanies are highly ambiguous encounters with the gods. There is never certainty within epiphanies, the gods can be present in a variety of forms and can even lie about the forms that they take. gods can therefore always be present but also can never be truly known. The balance between the presence and unknowability of the gods is therefore achieved through this tension between the potential omnipresence of the gods and their complete distance from mortals.

²³ Turkeltaub, 'Perceiving Iliadic Gods', 51.

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