

# The Adjectives ὅσιος and ἀνόσιος referring to Divinities in Euripides<sup>1</sup>

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The use of ὅσιος (“holy”) and ἀνόσιος (“unholy”)<sup>2</sup> applied to divinities, which Euripides gives us three examples of, seems peculiar and is highly infrequent in archaic and classical literature. The first example is found in *Alcestis* (E. *Alc.* 10), where ὅσιος refers to Apollo who has been punished by Zeus and has to work in servitude to a mortal. It is Apollo himself who, in the prologue, says that his behaviour towards Admetus has been ὅσιος. Secondly, in *Heraclidae*, Alcmena considers that it is Zeus who should know whether his behaviour towards her is ὅσιος (E. *Heracl.* 719). Finally, Orestes claims that Apollo must be condemned and considered ἀνόσιος because of Clytemnestra’s murder (E. *Or.* 595-596).

Apollo (*Alc.* 10: ὀσίῳ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς ὅσιος ὦν ἐτύγγανον, “I am myself godly, and in Admetus, son of Pheres, I found a godly man”)<sup>3</sup> applies the adjective to himself concerning his relationship of hospitality with Admetus in which both showed each other due respect<sup>4</sup>. Even if this characteristic applied to a god seems odd, it should be pointed out that ὅσιος is expressed by the divinity himself. Traditionally, this line has been difficult to explain, because apart from the fact that it is unusual to apply this adjective to a god, it

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<sup>2</sup> Concerning the meaning of the term ὅσιος, see the latest contributions on this matter in the most useful and magnificent book by S. PEELS, *Hosios, A Semantic Study of Greek Piety*, Leiden / Boston, Brill, 2015 (this book includes the only complete discussion so far of all the cases of the usage of ὅσιος and cognates for gods, see pp. 149-167, 242-250), and A. C. VICENTE SÁNCHEZ, “Sagrado y sacrilego (ὅσιος y ἀνόσιος) en la tragedia griega” (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Text and translation by D. KOVACS, *Euripides. Cyclops, Alcestis, Medea*, vol. I, Cambridge, Mass. / London, Harvard University Press, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> D. J. CONACHER, *Euripides. Alcestis*, Oxford, Aris & Phillips, 1988, pp. 156-157; E. CALDERÓN DORDA, “El homo religiosus euripídeo”, *Prometheus*, 41, 2015, 58.

seemed that Apollo could not receive it as he was not purified after killing the Cyclopes. For these reasons, different solutions have been proposed, such as the elimination of the line, or considering its use as a reiterative rhetorical device, as a different meaning of the adjective used exclusively in this situation, as the human appearance as Admeto's slave, or as a different version in which Apollo had been purified<sup>5</sup>; another interpretation has been proposed by Elferink: within the idea that *Alcestis* is not a tragedy but a satyr-play, Elferink considers that Apollo's words are ironic and reveal to the audience what type of drama they are watching<sup>6</sup>; and finally, another solution has been suggested: according to Peels, with the use of this adjective "Apollo contributes to *creating* the comical 'partly god and partly human' status he has in this play"<sup>7</sup>.

In the case of Zeus in *Heraclidae* 719 (εἰ δ' ἔστιν ὄσιος αὐτὸς οἶδεν εἰς ἐμέ, "But he knows best whether he has behaved in godly fashion toward me")<sup>8</sup>, it should be taken into account that from his relationship with Alcmene Heracles was born<sup>9</sup>, so that it would refer to the respect that the god should show her because of their union and their descendants, without forgetting that Alcmene and Heracles' children are suppliants at the altar of Zeus. According to the expression Alcmene uses, it is Zeus himself who knows whether he is ὄσιος towards her, so that here again the adjective would be used by the god whom it is applied to. Concerning this line, Parker comments that "the linguistic audacity makes the point that gods might be expected to behave towards men with the same morality that they require of men in their dealings with each other"<sup>10</sup>. In a similar interpretation Peels

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<sup>5</sup> These interpretations already appeared in the older editions by E. F. WÜSTEMANN, *Euripidis Alcestis*, Gotha, Sumtibus Ettingeri, 1823, pp. 7-8; W. S. HADLEY, *The Alcestis of Euripides*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1896, pp. 46-47; H. W. HAYLEY, *The Alcestis of Euripides*, Boston, Ginn. and Co., 1898, pp. 61-62; A. M. DALE, *Euripides. Alcestis*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 52; and the arguments have been repeated subsequently (see G. A. SEECK, *Euripides. Alkestis*, Berlin / New York, De Gruyter, 2008, p. 57; A. MARKANTONATOS, *Euripides' Alcestis. Narrative, Myth, and Religion*, Berlin / Boston, De Gruyter, 2013, p. 28; C. A. E. LUSCHNIG, H. M. ROISMAN, *Euripides' Alcestis*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2003, p. 54). See S. PEELS, *op. cit.*, pp. 156-158, where different interpretations of this use of ὄσιος can be found.

<sup>6</sup> L. T. ELFERINK, "The Beginning of Euripides' *Alcestis*", *AC*, 25, 1982, 44 and 49. It must be taken into account that *Alcestis* as a Satyr-Play is not consensually accepted; this paper does not agree with it and proposes a different interpretation of the adjective.

<sup>7</sup> S. PEELS, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> Text and translation by D. KOVACS, *Euripides. Children of Heracles. Hippolytus, Andromache, Hecuba*, vol. II, Cambridge, Mass. / London, Harvard University Press, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> The ὀσιότης of this passage is usually attributed to the extension to the relationship between a mother and a father of the compulsory piety of children towards their parents: see J. WILKINS, *Euripides. Heraclidae*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 142; W. ALLAN, *Euripides. The Children of Heracles*, Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 2001, p. 189; S. PEELS, "Thwarted Expectations of Divine Reciprocity", *Mnemosyne*, 69, 2016, 567.

<sup>10</sup> L. P. E. PARKER, *Euripides. Alcestis*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 53; L. P. E. Parker links this use of ὄσιος for a divinity to that of Apollo in *E. Alc.* 10, even though, in her opinion, Euripides in the case of *Alcestis* merely "seems to be to produce the kind of repetitive word-play that he enjoys".

considers the text of *Heraclidae* 719 “a critical or even ironical statement”, the deliberate effect of which would be “to bring Zeus down to the level of a human”<sup>11</sup>.

The third example is the curious use of the derivative ἀνόσιος applied to a divinity in the intense *agon* between Orestes and Tyndareus on the death of Clytemnestra. They agree that both Orestes and matricide are ἀνόσιος (*Or.* 481, 546, 563), but in his defence speech he adds one apologetic argument after another *in crescendo*, culminating in the proof of his innocence: it is not he himself, but the god Apollo, whose orders he obeyed<sup>12</sup>, who should be considered ἀνόσιος and condemned, since it was Apollo who acted wrongfully (*Or.* 595-596: ἐκείνον ἠγέισθ' ἀνόσιον καὶ κτείνετε / ἐκείνος ἡμαρτ', οὐκ ἐγώ, “Consider him unholy, put him to death! It was he who acted wrongfully, not I”)<sup>13</sup>. In this case, Euripides shows the accusation of the god using a technique similar to forensic rhetoric<sup>14</sup>, where the culprit of a ἁμαρτία is ἀνόσιος<sup>15</sup>. And again it is not a human who directly designates the divinity, but Orestes presses for the accusation of the god through an indefinite plural subject in his words. He could be referring to the characters on stage<sup>16</sup>, but as he has already done at other times during the tragedy, at this decisive moment he pathetically invokes the Erinyes who are pursuing him, whom he had already expressly urged to blame Phoebus' oracles in lines 273-276 (*Or.* 275-276: τί δῆτα μέλλετ'; ἐξακρίζετ' αἰθέρα / πετροῖς, τὰ Φοίβου

<sup>11</sup> S. PEELS, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-164; S. PEELS, *loc. cit.*, 566-568.

<sup>12</sup> In this tragedy, Electra had already held Apollo responsible for persuading her brother, who did not want to disobey the god (*E. Or.* 28-31, 191-193), and also Helen attributes the ἁμαρτία to Phoebus (*Or.* 76). On the condemnations of Apollo in this tragedy, see J. C. GIBERT, “Apollo's Sacrifice: the Limits of a Metaphor in Greek Tragedy”, *HSCP*, 101, 2003, 159-206.

<sup>13</sup> Texts and translations by D. KOVACS, *Euripides. Helen, Phoenician Women, Orestes*, vol. V, Cambridge, Mass. / London, Harvard University Press, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> On the “forensic” style of Orestes' defence (*Or.* 544-601), see C. W. WILLINK, *Euripides. Orestes*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 173; M. L. WEST, *Euripides. Orestes*, Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 1987, pp. 220-223; J. R. PORTER, *Studies in Euripides' Orestes*, Leiden / New York / Köln, Brill, 1994, pp. 130-164; M. C. SCHAMUN, “Orestes de Eurípides, vv. 491-604”, *Synthesis*, 6, 1999, 137-155. And already before, Aeschylus, in *Eumenides*, had presented an Apollo responsible for the matricide together with Orestes, described in forensic terms (*A. Eu.* 199-200: μεταίτιος and παναίτιος), see E. CALDERÓN DORDA, “Orestes y la impiedad del héroe”, *A&R*, 10, 2016, 27.

<sup>15</sup> It appears like this in Antipho 3.3.11. On the meaning of ἁμαρτία in this case, see the comments on Antipho 3.2.8 and 3.3.8 by V. M. RAMÓN PALERM, “Oratoria”, in V. M. Ramón Palerm, G. Sopeña Genzor, A. C. Vicente Sánchez (edd.), *Irreligiosidad y Literatura en la Atenas Clásica*, Coimbra / São Paulo, Coimbra University Press – Annablume, 2018, pp. 213-218.

<sup>16</sup> This reference is rarely defined or explained: W. BIEHL, *Euripides. Orestes*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1965, p. 66 points to the plural imperatives and indicates that they refer to his enemies (personified in Tyndareus) that Orestes, in a fit of passion, imagines as if they were present (to prove this, he quotes the reference to them in line 436); to C. W. WILLINK, *op. cit.*, pp. 177 and 181, they would refer to “you and people like you”, as he considers occurs in line 564, where he thinks that Euripides would also have written a second person plural instead of the singular that has been transmitted; also M. L. WEST, *op. cit.*, p. 223, points them out and interprets “all of you”; J. C. GIBERT, *loc. cit.*, 192 indicates that “if they refer to anyone in particular, they refer to the Argives (including Tyndareus) who will shortly sit in judgement on him”; S. PEELS, *op. cit.*, p. 155, uses “people” as the subject.

δ' αἰτιάσθε θέσφατα, "No more delaying! Mount up to the upper air with your wings: it's Phoebus' oracles you should blame!"). This way, it would be, again, the divinities themselves who would pronounce the adjective referring to their equals. According to Peels<sup>17</sup>, Orestes in *Or.* 595 calls Apollo ἀνόσιος as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the moral criticism on the matricide by this opponent and she considers that the discrediting of Apollo as ἀνόσιος is incongruous<sup>18</sup>: the character, aware of its paradoxical use, would be using it to a sought after effect, in a rhetorical way, because his grandiloquent and desperate attempt to save his life makes him turn to new arguments.

In my opinion, Euripides was aware of the peculiarity of using these terms for divinities, as the human characters do not use the adjective directly to refer to the gods, but instead the actual gods themselves pronounce it, or its expression is attributed to them. This way, mortals do not dare pronounce the word ὄσιος (or the opposite ἀνόσιος) referring to the gods, but they leave this responsibility to other divinities.

There are other exceptional uses of the term ὄσιος related to divinities, more literary references where the ὄσια / ὄσιη of gods is mentioned. These are found in Pindar, *Pythian Odes* 9.36, and in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 130, 173, 470, the majority of which are passages of difficult interpretation<sup>19</sup>. Going into a detailed analysis of each of these passages would go far beyond the objectives of this present study<sup>20</sup>, but the fundamental point to understand these references seems not to have been taken into account so far. In the Pindaric ode, Apollo asks Chiron about the ὄσια of something he wants to do (*Pi. P.* 9.36)<sup>21</sup>. In the Homeric Hymn it is successively told how Hermes longs for the ὄσιη of the meat of Apollo's cattle (*h. Merc.* 130)<sup>22</sup>. Hermes expresses his wish to reach the same ὄσιη as Apollo (*h. Merc.* 173), and finally Hermes, speaking to Apollo directly, tells him that Zeus loves him ἐκ πάσης ὄσιης (*h. Merc.* 470)<sup>23</sup>. All these obscure comments refer to Apollo, which is why the connection of this divinity with the notion of ὄσιος should be defined. It should also be noted that it is still divinities who keep pronouncing these references.

<sup>17</sup> S. PEELS, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-156.

<sup>18</sup> In a similar way, it is considered an absurd argument and attributed to Orestes' confusion or desperation: see H. G. MULLENS, "The Meaning of Euripides' *Orestes*", *CQ*, 34, 1940, 154-155; W. BIEHL, *op. cit.*, p. 66; C. W. WILLINK, *op. cit.*, p. 181; J. C. GIBERT, *loc. cit.*, 193 and 196; J. HOLZHAUSEN, *Euripides Politikos. Recht und Rache in Orestes und Bakchen*, München / Leipzig, De Gruyter, 2003, p. 92.

<sup>19</sup> These are the very rare cases we have, see S. PEELS, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>20</sup> See the excellent analysis on this passages in S. PEELS, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-162, 164, 242-251.

<sup>21</sup> Apollo wanted to know if there is ὄσια in his union with the nymph Cyrene. To L. P. E. PARKER, *op. cit.*, p. 53, the meaning of the adjective here would be similar to that of E. *Heracl.* 719 (see *supra*); S. PEELS, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-162, equally considers the humanization of Apollo and its comic effect on the scene, both in *Pi. P.* 9.36 and in *E. Alc.* 10.

<sup>22</sup> Note that these words come from the divinity, since the poet was merely a spokesperson for the Muses.

<sup>23</sup> S. PEELS insists on how these uses of ὄσιη "contribute to the introduction of 'a human perspective' in the Hymn" and concludes that "the paradoxical and thus marked usage of ὄσιη for a god, contributes strongly to this poetic effort" (S. PEELS, *op. cit.*, pp. 250-251).

In short, it should be emphasized, on the one hand, how these texts transmit the difficulty of a human using the term ὄσιος for a divinity, given the fact that this term belongs to the semantic field of human behaviour among each other and towards the gods. Therefore, its expression is attributed to divinities, so that the usage of ὄσιος and its cognates would not seem strange or incongruous to the audience (as it would have if these terms would have been used by humans towards the gods). On the other hand, the close connection between Apollo and the use of the term ὄσιος for divinities has been established: the term applied to divinities usually occurs when this god is directly related to or involved with humans, when he carries out actions that are proper to mortals<sup>24</sup>, so that this characteristic could indeed be underlined. In my opinion, it does not necessarily imply a comical effect on the spectators or contemporary audience, nor is it an indication of incongruence or confusion of a character like Orestes, since, as has been pointed out, the culprit of ἄμαρτία is ἀνόσιος, something which the Erinyes can declare. These attitudes, especially Apollo's, cause the fact that a vocabulary specific to the relationships of humans towards gods is used<sup>25</sup>. In the case of its usage for Zeus, various factors could be taken into account, among which two specially stand out: the first would be that the situation in which Zeus finds himself with Alcmena, as the father of her son, could resemble that of a human, so the use of this adjective would be an extension of the meaning commonly applied to Apollo; also, it might be considered a reflection of the connection between this adjective and the god Zeus that Aeschylus' texts transmit<sup>26</sup>, according to which the god himself should make up his mind as to whether he fulfils this characteristic, linked to him in Aeschylus' tragedies, from a human point of view.

Finally, it should be considered that it is Euripides who transmits three examples of this use, rarely sanctioned in previous texts and without any examples in texts shortly after. In these tragedies, the use of the term ὄσιος for divinities who descend to the world of mortals may be an indication of religious criticism by the characters of Euripides, since the behaviour of

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<sup>24</sup> To S. Peels these uses applied to divinities do not represent a normal but an exceptional semantic characteristic. Given the fact that ὄσιος essentially defines human actions and attitudes that please the divinities and provide them with the τιμή that they deserve, its use for divinities seems paradoxical and should be understood as a way to bring the divinity down to a human level (S. PEELS, op. cit., p. 154): I consider these correct conclusions that, however, would slightly change if it were taken into account that this feature of the gods is not expressed by humans but by the gods themselves.

<sup>25</sup> It is not the first time that the vocabulary proper to human attitudes towards the gods is applied to Apollo: in Aeschylus *Eumenides* the chorus reproaches Apollo for worshipping humans in the way that humans should worship the gods (which is usually expressed through σέβω), in a specially problematic way as it is an ἄθεος human: "by showing respect for the suppliant, a godless man who injured his parents" (A. Eu. 151-152: τὸν ἐκέταν σέβων, ἄθεον ἄνδρα καὶ / τοκεῦσιν πικρὸν, text and translation by A. H. SOMMERSTEIN, *Aeschylus. Oresteia*, vol. II, Cambridge, Mass. / London, Harvard University Press, 2008); similarly in A. Eu. 169-172: see A. C. VICENTE SÁNCHEZ, op. cit., pp. 77-79).

<sup>26</sup> See A. C. VICENTE SÁNCHEZ, "Sagrado y sacrilego (ὄσιος y ἀνόσιος) en la tragedia griega" (forthcoming).

the gods moves away from divine spheres in such a way that they receive the same vocabulary as humans. It does not mean that this irreligious comment could cause consternation in the audience because of the force of the expression: they are slight references, subtle allusions, that in the audience may create this doubt, this critical approach towards the traditional religion, but so slight that they did not become the cause of a conflicting reaction, nor explicitly formulated an atheistic statement that would have been rash and imprudent at that time. These insinuations on the nature of the gods are not uncommon in Euripides' tragedies, and they are expressed as hints (see *E. Hel.* 1137-1150, *El.* 583-584, *Tr.* 885-886, *HF* 62 and 1345, *Or.* 418, *IA* 1034-1035, *Ba.* 894)<sup>27</sup>, that do not appear to constitute a threat to traditional beliefs<sup>28</sup>.

**ABSTRACT:** The use of the adjective ὄσιος (or its cognates) applied to divinities has always seemed peculiar, but there is no homogeneous interpretation of this use. In this study, some characteristics will be proposed that have not been taken into account so far and that may help to understand these specific meanings of ὄσιος and its cognates in Euripides.

**KEYWORDS:** divinities; ὄσιος; ἀνόσιος.

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<sup>27</sup> These insinuations are expressed as hints by characters in misfortunes, which lead them to show that scepticism. Nevertheless, these insinuations should neither cause us to consider Euripides an atheist (we should not forget that it is not Euripides who expresses these doubts, but his mythical characters), nor to make us believe that his tragedies are a criticism of the traditional religion: see a detailed comment on these passages (with bibliography about the so called "atheism" of Euripides) in A. C. VICENTE SÁNCHEZ, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-150.

<sup>28</sup> See M. Á. DURÁN LÓPEZ, *Los dioses en crisis. Actitud de los sofistas ante la tendencia religiosa del hombre*, Madrid, Ediciones Clásicas, 2011, pp. 89-130.

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