**Conceptualising Manteis in Greek Tragedy: Rethinking Translation and Definition**

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**Abstract**

*The following will propose a new method for conceptualising manteis of Classical Greece, utilising Greek Tragedy of the fifth century BCE as a case study in their reception. It is proposed that educators may more easily convey scholarly understanding of these figures through a series of three alternate terms, thereby avoiding the trappings of current methods of categorisation and definition. By conceptualising manteis with the terms ‘Holy Man’, ‘Seer’, and ‘Peddler’, one may tie English connotations with that of the Greek. Thus, in situations where transliteration is not possible - for example, in the popular Oxford, Penguin, and Loeb translations - one may easily encapsulate the purpose of these figures in different contexts.*

**Introduction**

The question of this article is straightforward: how can one accurately translate a term as multifaceted as *mantis*? Specifically, this question is directed towards teaching environments and translation; where the briefest possible substitute must be utilised. For decades scholars have attempted to concisely present definitions of the term *mantis*, with varying degrees of success. Likewise, many translators will, without conscious acknowledgement, subscribe to the need for contextual translations. Often, terms such as ‘diviner’ or ‘prophet’ will be substituted (e.g. Kovacs’ and Lloyd-Jones’ Loeb editions of Euripides, *Heraclidae* 340, 401; Sophocles, *Antigone* 1212). These substitutions can be unnecessarily confusing and misleading. The treatment of Calchas in Sophocles’ *Ajax* is one such example. In the Lloyd-Jones and Grene/Lattimore editions Calchas is referred to as ‘prophet’ and associated with ‘prophecy’ (ll. 746, 760, 783, 801). Sophocles only uses variations of the noun *mantis* and its related verb, though, carrying different connotations. The most misleading translation is of

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*For greater accessibility, the first reference to each source is provided in full, with all subsequent citations following the abbreviations set out in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edition. The Loeb editions of Collard and Cropp, Kovacs, Lloyd-Jones, and Sommerstein have been utilised for translation (often featuring my own modification) and Greek text; fragment numbers also follow these editions. Reference to specific editions will occur by last name only; full publication details are provided in the bibliography.*
line 783, where *ei Kalchas sophos* (“if Calchas is wise”) is translated by Lloyd-Jones to be “if Calchas is a true prophet”. Such translation unintentionally strips the Greek of its implications about the skills of Calchas and the possibility for error, and replaces them with visions of inspiration.

In the following, a new method for conceptualising these figures will be proposed which accommodates for the ambiguity of the English language while maintaining accuracy. Each category will be discussed in relation to these figures in tragedy, demonstrating the clear contextual variations of the term *mantis*. In each case the characteristics of the category are identified to establish the means for their differentiation, while examples will be noted where contextual, systematised translation is most effective. Through application of the terms ‘Holy Man’, ‘Seer’, and ‘Peddler’ educators and scholars may rely on the natural connotations of the English language to impart some understanding of these figures.

There are three key reasons for the foundation of this study in tragedy. (1) Tragedy forms a cornerstone of undergraduate study in the Classics; every student must become familiar with this corpus of texts. (2) Tragedy contains examples that convey the various perceptions of *manteis* in Classical Greece; tragedy was a reflection of wider society and so may be utilised as a means to examine popular perceptions (see also the preface of Mikalson, 1991). (3) Owing to the complexity of the language utilised by the extant playwrights, tragedy necessitates the use of translations while proficiency in Greek is attained (an unforgiving task in itself; to understand the crucial position translations hold for the new university student one only has to reflect on the dire image cast by Hanson & Heath, 1998: 161-71). These three facets combined illustrate why tragedy is an ideal data set on which one may test the value of contextual definition and systematic translation. The reappraisal of how scholars translate this term into English, especially in the popular translations made available for school and undergraduate education, will contribute to a higher understanding of these figures amongst students. At the same time, this method avoids the trappings of restrictive definitions and loose categorisation which fails to fully convey scholarly understanding.

First, one must note the deficiencies of current definitions. Platnauer believes that “a *mantis* is one who interprets divine signs: a *chrēsmologos* is one who has a store of oracles” (Platnauer, 1964: 154). Argyle, based on the revisions of Classen, believes that “a *mantis* is an official interpreter of signs: a *chrēsmologos* is an unofficial collector and purveyor of
oracles who has no public authorization” (Argyle, 1970: 139). Mikalson is in agreement with Argyle (Mikalson, 1983: 40-1), whilst Smith disagrees with the strength of the distinctions drawn by these scholars (Smith, 1989: 142, n. 6), citing his faith in Fontenrose’s interpretation that “chrēsmologos and mantiς are overlapping terms for a speaker of oracles” (Fontenrose, 1978: 153). The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* entry, composed by Parker, contradicts all of these interpretations, stating that *prophētaί* are associated with official bodies, while “an unattached seer is *mantiς or chrēsmologos*” (Parker, 2003: 1259).

One may, with relative ease, demonstrate why these definitions are not comprehensive. Fontenrose indicates that a *mantiς* is a “speaker of oracles” (Fontenrose, 1978:153), carrying connotations of divine inspiration (especially in its most frequent identification with the Delphic Oracle). This definition does not account for the explicit identification of mantic arts as a learned skill (*techne*), though, and nor does it account for amateur practice of dream interpretation, extispicy, or ornithomancy, which clearly denote a technical ability. At least some arts of the *mantiς* were grounded in a technical skill rather than an irrational and inscrutable process; signs were read and interpreted systematically.

While Argyle and Parker’s definitions are not immediately objectionable, they are quite clearly contradictory. Argyle maintains that *manteis* are “official” interpreters; authoritative state-registered seers. Parker, conversely, states that *prophētaί* are official interpreters, attached to established oracular shrines, and *manteis* unofficial. The finality of both definitions is misleading, however. In Euripides’ *Andromache*, Delphian officials are found standing next to *manteis* in an official setting, as representatives of Apollo (ll. 1101-3). Similarly, we find Demophon, mythical King of Athens, gathering his *manteis* to make sacrifice, trusting their authority in sacrifices which would dictate the fate of the city. Here the Greek middle voice (*thusomai*) indicates that other, more qualified or authoritative individuals would perform the ritual in his stead (Eur. *Heracl.* 340; Allan, 2001: 158). They could also be found representing bodies quite apart from divination in their roles as communal leaders (Dillery, 2005: 225). An example of this is found when AmphiarAus pours libations to the river gods as a form of border-crossing ritual (Euripides, *Fragment* 752h. 29-32). Not *sphagia* or *hiera*, the terms with which sacrifice is usually associated, but a verb of libation; a rite of pacification, not sacrifice and interpretation (as discussed further below). Frequent, authoritative representation by *manteis* suggests that limiting “official” interpretation to established oracular shrines is too restrictive.
Similarly, Argyle’s definition is not all encompassing. Manteis are neither unofficial nor official figures; they can be construed as either. It is restrictive to think of them as ‘belonging’ to either category. The scorn heaped upon these figures in tragedy and elsewhere indicates that not only were the Greeks suspicious of their ultimate motives, but they were presumed to be frauds and profiteers, and are mocked as practising divination “by lot” (Euripides, Hippolytus 1057-9; see further comments below). Clearly there are unscrupulous individuals damaging the reputation of the profession. The abuse hurled at manteis in tragedy, and the nature of the accusations cast against them (profiteering and fraud; accusations against the individual, never the gods), denote the presence of a sub-class of diviner in the ancient world. The scepticism with which these figures are met voices doubt over the credibility of their practices and reflects a very real fear of the far-reaching consequences of false interpretations. Both Argyle and Parker are correct in some cases, then, but they cannot accommodate the variations in the portrayal of manteis.

Finally, Platnauer’s restrictive criterion of a mantis as an interpreter of signs is suspect. Bremmer likewise restricts male manteis as technical specialists, without noting the apparent contradiction shortly after when it is noted that Helenus could hear a voice of the gods (Homer, Iliad 7.53; Bremmer, 1993: 153-4). Manteis are often shown to operate as conduits for the divine. There was a perception of something unnatural in their behaviour (Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannus 708-9). We find that manteis seem to have a hereditary gift, an inherent ability to be inspired by the gods’ will, indicating that not all of the mantis’ arts originated with regulated learning. Teiresias had a prophetic son (Sophocles, Fragment 392), Polyidus was the descendant of Melampus (Soph. F390, 391; Grant & Hazel, 1973: s. v. Melampus, Polydus), Theonoe received her gift of foreknowledge from her grandfather Nereus (Euripides, Helena 10-5), Amphiaraus was related to Melampus and Mantius (Mantius, given his name, was in all likelihood a seer: Dillery, 2005: 173), and Cassandra and Helenus were both children of Priam (Sophocles, Philoctetes 603-21; cf. Grant & Hazel, 1973: 384, Genealogical Tree). It is worth noting that both Polypheides and Cassandra had the ability to prophesise implanted within them by Apollo; one might conceive this ability as a form of hidden talent able to be awoken. Apollo himself was said to have had his mind inspired with seer craft by Zeus (Aeschylus, Eumenides 17-8). Some manteis may rely on a skill, but clearly many were thought to rely on some inborn ‘gift’, some talent which opened them to communication with the gods. Thus, while every one of the examples above are valid, the
variations in the portrayal of manteis are almost impossible to accommodate in a universal definition.

The ambiguity of the English language, matching that of the Greek, plays a significant role in how a reader will conceive a mantis. The Liddell and Scott definition for mantis hints at the different functions of this individual, defining mantis as “a diviner, soothsayer, seer, prophet” (Liddell & Scott, 2007: s. v. mantis). What do these words mean in English, though? A diviner is “one who divines; a soothsayer; a prophet; a conjecturer” (Delbridge, et al., 1991: s. v. diviner). A soothsayer is “one who professes to foretell events” (Delbridge, et al., 1991: s. v. soothsayer). A seer is “1. One who foretells future events; a prophet. 2. A magician, clairvoyant, or other person claiming to have occult powers” (Delbridge, et al., 1991: s. v. seer). These terms are, judging by English definitions, synonyms. How can we accurately convey what these individuals are when a diviner is a soothsayer and a seer is a prophet? These definitions serve to demonstrate the cause of the difficulty students have in conceptualising manteis; the words used to differentiate between functions currently have no objective meaning.

In response to these trials, scholars have returned to the categorisation established by Halliday in the early twentieth century. Halliday divides mantic arts into ‘inductive’ and ‘intuitive’ processes, one based on “religion and inspiration, the other on a rationally invented pseudo-science” (Halliday, 1967: 54-5). Flower has adapted this concept and divided seer craft into “possession divination, intuitive divination and technical divination” (Flower, 2008: 87-8). As with Halliday’s appraisal, though, this division, while avoiding the failings of a ‘definition’, continues to misrepresent the piety of some figures. It has difficulty conveying the communal aspects of manteis; the following categorisation is an evolution of this categorisation.

Thus, there is a need in modern scholarship for the reappraisal of these figures. In the following, three alternate terms are identified which may assist in the conceptualisation of manteis. Time will be spent in each category identifying characteristics and means of differentiation with examples from tragedy. The result is three clear categories in which one may situate any given mantis, and an accurate term for translation. Each term is a partial definition in itself thanks to the natural English connotations. When applied systematically in translation, a student may immediately conceptualise the alternate functions of manteis. This
avoids the confusion brought on by contradictory definitions and haphazard application of terms such as ‘prophet’ in contexts where the function does not match the implied definition.

**The Holy Man**

The term ‘Holy Man’ has been nominated due to its neutrality when concerned with divination (a term not entirely dissimilar to, and partially derived from, the usage in the seminal article of Brown, 1971, albeit with a very different cultural context). This circumvents the immediate connotations which may come to mind when ‘soothsayer’ or ‘shaman’ is applied. Generally well received by the community, concerned with communal religious practices, and relying on skill in order to read signs, the Holy Man operates in the mould of a community leader or advisor. This form of *mantis* does not exhibit inspired prophetic possession, and receives less of the hostility directed towards inspired and unscrupulous *manteis*. *Manteis* of this variety offer advice on a general level and are respected means of interpreting signs.

The Holy Man *mantis* relied on skill, rather than inspiration, to ascertain information about forthcoming events. This is made explicit by Prometheus’ statement that he granted humans the ability to interpret signs (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Vinctus* 497-500) and when *manteis* are said to possess a skill (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 248-9; Soph. *Ant.* 998, *OT* 357, 389; Eur. *F757*; cf. Hom. *Il.* 1.69-72). This terminology suggests that ornithomancy (divination by the flight of birds) and extispicy/hepatoscopy (study of entrails/the liver) are technical skills able to be taught and refined. This is further illustrated through their application by individuals without any formal training. Tragedy contains examples of the uninitiated practicing dream interpretation (Aeschylus, *Choephoroe* 526-50; Euripides, *Hecuba* 702-9; Sophocles, *Electra* 406-30), extispicy (Euripides, *Electra* 820ff.) and ornithomancy (Aeschylus, *Persae* 206ff.; Euripides, *Hercules Furens* 595-6). The servant in Euripides’ *Ion* also displays this skill, for he, simply by being brought up amongst “good seers”, was able to interpret omens and react accordingly (l. 1190). Moreover, several passages indicate that these skills could be preserved in handbooks (Euripides, *Phoenissae* 834-44; cf. Isocrates, *Aegineticus*), allowing for the possibility of structured or institutional study. It is therefore demonstrable that some abilities of the *mantis* were grounded in a technical skill rather than an irrational and inscrutable process.
The knowledge that any individual may interpret signs without prior training, in addition to the possibility of structured study, would naturally encourage the propagation of professionals capable of providing reliable interpretations. The role of interpretation in the Holy Man’s function may be best exemplified by Euripides (Iphigenia Taurica 710-24), where the interpretation is mistrusted, but the manifestation of the god’s desire within signs is unquestionable. This demonstrates the plausibility of the Holy Man’s craft, but also the susceptibility of his methodology to misapprehension. The doubt that may be placed in a Holy Man’s ability to correctly interpret a sign plays a key role in the differentiation of Holy Men from Seers; there was no element of interpretation in the Seer’s function as a conduit, because the god would speak directly through the individual. Suspicion would focus on whether the Seer was falsifying his/her entire display. Examples abound in tragedy of manteis whose interpretations are trustworthy enough for them to be considered professional (Aes. Ag. 934: “yes, if someone with proper knowledge had prescribed this ritual”; Eur. IT. 662-3: “Calchas skilled in the omens of birds”; Euripides, Supplices 155-6: Theseus: “did you consult seers?” Adrastus: “Ah! You press me hard just where my failure is greatest”; the identification of Teiresias as oiōnomantis– one who takes omens from the flight of birds - in Eur. Phoe.777). Aeschylus also implies awareness of professional manteis:

I certainly choose you as my interpreter in this matter; may it be as you say! Now explain the rest to your friends, telling this one to take action and that one to take no action.

Choephoroe 551-3

The selection of Orestes as interpreter indicates several things (I take teratoskopos to be a synonym for mantis, as does Johnston, 2008: 129). Firstly, that individuals offering to interpret signs were widespread enough that the Chorus knew they could elect who to trust. Secondly, that an interpretation may be feasibly rejected in place of a more favourable one by another Holy Man (cf. Eur. Supp. 158-61, where Adrastus elected to reject Amphiaraus’ advice). The ability to nominate a desired interpreter, and the acknowledgement that good manteis were known by reputation and expected to be well trained, demonstrates that interpreters of omens had professionalised the skill-set to such an extent that it was well known throughout society. The clear indication that this role was professionalised and the prevalence of such interpreters emphasises the need to differentiate between inspired manteis
and those who relied on this technical skill. There is a separation between those who were capable of learning a skill and those able to be inspired with the truth by the gods, and it is deceptive to accept generalisations which neglect this distinction.

Fragments of Euripides’ Hypsipyle demonstrate the ability for manteis to perform duties distinct from those associated with divination. Amphiaraus’ request for running water in order to pour libations (Eur. F752h. 29-32) is unorthodox when compared to divinatory ceremonies one expects to be performed by diviners or prophets. What exemplifies Amphiaraus’ transcendence of the terms diviner and prophet is the use of the verb cheaimetha (“pour offerings”: Liddell and Scott, 2007: s. v. cheô). The rituals manteis perform are usually associated with the terms sphagia and hiera, each of which have a dual function enabling them to be linked to both divination and pacification rites. The verb cheô, on the other hand, is solely associated with libation ritual and has no association with divination. Moreover, Amphiaraus’ justification for performing libation further distinguishes the act from foretelling: “as we cross the border into another country we wish to make sacrifice for our Danaid army” (ll. 35-6). The rights for border crossing are not linked with foretelling, but with pacification (Jameson, 1991: 202). The rituals undertaken here are therefore focused on the appeasement of gods, and the only signs taken are those to indicate that it is acceptable to cross. Whilst manteis were commonly associated with sacrifice and extispicy, their function was not limited to such ritual actions, and they would undertake ceremonial interaction with the gods on others’ behalf in a role which, by necessity, would be reserved for pious and respected figures.

The physical appearance of Amphiaraus may be closely linked to his identification in translations as Holy Man. In Phoenissae a great speech is provided in order to describe the Seven (ll. 1090-199). For each individual a detailed description of the symbols emblazoned upon their shields is provided; Atalanta overcoming the Aetolian boar with her far-darting arrows, the all-seeing Argus, the pelt of a lion with bristling mane, wild mares of Potniae prancing in panic, an earthborn giant carrying the uprooted city of Thebes on its back, a hundred snakes bearing off Theban children, and to Amphiaraus a modestly unmarked shield. Each shield description features evocative descriptions to strengthen the contrast against the simplistic modesty of Amphiaraus’ equipment. The reason for Amphiaraus’ modesty is explained as stemming from his desire not to give the appearance of excellence, but to actually be aristos (“best”. Aeschylus, Septem contra Thebas 592). This chasm between
Amphiaraus and the remaining six is similarly enforced through his choice of language in *Seven against Thebes*: he speaks “in the tones of ordinary conversation” (Bacon, 1964: 30), utilising the verbs *basdō*, *legō*, and *audaō*, in contrast to those most frequently used by the remaining six: *bremō*, *boaō*, and *epalalasdō* (Bacon, 1964: 30). As has been noted by DeVito (1999: 170, n. 14), Amphiaraus’ separation is not an attempt to heroise the character. It is a continual assertion of his piety; heroisation is merely a by-product of his sense of duty and faith (e.g. Aes. Sept. 587, 596. For its dramatic function see Otis, 1960: 168; Thalmann, 1978: 117-9; Zeitlin, 1982: 147-9).

Further strengthening the aura around this man is his purity and prioritisation of the divine above all else (Eur. F752k. 21). When Amphiaraus is first met in *Seven against Thebes* he is belaboured by Tydeus (ll. 377-83) and accused of cowardice. Yet, as a mark of his authority, Tydeus is respecting his prophesying (Collins, 2008: 340-2). The religious overtones of Amphiaraus’ character have already been noted. In addition to this, the play’s emphasis on purity may be utilised to provide insight into this character. The identification of Amphiaraus’ chariot as white serves to invoke associations with purity (Eur. Phoe. 172). White was a powerful colour: in the Orphic cult the need to dress in pure white reflects a link between the divine and the colour itself (Demosthenes 18.258-60; Eur. F472 & n. 6 to the text; see further discussion of Orphism and white in Tierney, 1922: 85; Cornford, 1903: 441; Stukey, 1936: 291; Lloyd, 1962: 58, n. 13). The colour serves to illustrate the depth of Amphiaraus’ piety and his role distinct from *manteis* commissioned solely to view omens. Amphiaraus exemplifies the inadequacy of terms such as ‘diviner’ and ‘soothsayer’ to convey the true sense of some *manteis*’ functions.

Teiresias in the *Bacchae* of Euripides likewise holds little resemblance to a soothsayer or diviner. If references to distinctive characteristics of Teiresias were removed from this play, his character would be shapeless and generic, able to be filled by any individual. Teiresias in the *Bacchae* is *sophos*, a wise man (ll. 179, 186), and he explicitly states the irrelevance of his prophetic art to the plot of this play (ll. 368-9). Roth and Grube have attempted to explain away the absence of his prophetic skill through the use of terms like “intellectual” (Roth, 1984: 59) and “theological sophist” (Grube, 1961: 404). Such readings may simply confuse the issue of what a *mantis* is. If one applies the label of Holy Man to Teiresias his depiction becomes more logical, as he could readily serve as a respected member of the community capable of providing advice, distinct from his function as a diviner (cf. Soph. Aj. 748-51,
The compelling speech legitimising Dionysus and demonstrating the fallacy of Pentheus’ doubt (ll. 265ff.) contains no mention of Teiresias’ known relationship with Phoebus (ll. 328-30; cf. Soph. OT 284-6), as one might expect of an official representative or religious figure. Instead Teiresias argues along logical lines, explaining his rationale. Furthermore, Teiresias’ own arguments are fallible, unlike when practicing ornithomancy (Soph. Ant. 1091-4, 1178): “virtually every point he adduces in praise of Dionysus emerges in the subsequent action in just the opposite meaning: nurture of life, release from pain, the Bacchic madness, and so on” (Segal, 1997: 295-6; cf. Roth, 1984: 60). The presentation of Teiresias, with his reliance on logic rather than mantic ability, serves to verify the need for a conceptualisation of *manteis* which allows for their function outside the bounds of divination.

The Holy Man may, then, be differentiated in texts by his pious behaviour, capacity to serve as a community leader, and skills in technical divination. The contextual translation of *mantis* in this instance would naturally convey the Holy Man’s role and provide an immediate understanding of why he would be treated differently to other *manteis*.

**The Seer**

The term ‘Seer’ is a readily identifiable term to denote those *manteis* which Halliday would refer to as inductive and Michael Flower would deem to exhibit “inspired prophetic possession” (Flower, 2008: 87-8). This term in English conveys this sense of inspiration and foresight distinct from those *manteis* conceptualised above as Holy Men, who would serve in more religious capacities as leaders and advisors through application of a particular skill set. For the purposes of this demonstration, individuals called *prophētai* will also be included amongst those as candidates for conceptualisation as Seers (indeed, the manner in which translators use the English term prophet for both *prophētai* and *manteis* is a perfect illustration of how confusion can arise – Holy Men would operate in an entirely different manner to *prophētai*).

The Liddell and Scott definition hints at the capacity for *prophētai* and the Seer category of *manteis* to be considered closely related, through definition of *prophētēs* as an interpreter of a god’s will (Liddell and Scott, 2007: s. v. *prophētēs*). The term *prophētēs* did not preclude the use of *mantis* to denote inspired possession. In Aeschylus Apollo is often linked with the term
mantis in relation to his mastery of foretelling (Aes. Ag. 1202, 1275, Cho. 559, Eum. 62, 169, F350. 6). The pythia, whose abilities are characteristic of prophētai, also refers to herself as mantis in Eumenides (29). The revelation that inspired Seers can also serve as interpreters of dreams (Eur. Hec. 85-9) hints at an overlap in skill sets between these individuals. This overlap can be verified by Cassandra’s identification with mantic arts (mantikos): “Yes, we had indeed heard rumour of your mantic skills (mantikon), but we are not looking for any prophets” (Aes. Ag. 1098-9). Mantikos itself is usually connected with manteis; mantikos is used as a synonym for mantis in tragedy (Euripides, Iphigenia Aulidensis 520; Soph. Ant. 1055) and by Plato (Phaedrus 265b), and mantis is used as a general term for prophesying by Euripides (Medea 239, where dei mantin einaí – “it is necessary to be a mantis” - is an equivalent of manteuesthai – to divine: Bayfield, 1925: 64). This similarity is also demonstrated by Apollo’s identification as mantis and prophētēs in consecutive lines (Aes. Eum. 17-9). It becomes apparent that there was little separation between inspired manteis and prophētēs.

The Seer necessitates differentiation from a Holy Man as it is clear that this inspiration would constitute the god himself/herself speaking directly to the recipients of a prophecy. For example, Apollo regards the oracle he provided to Orestes as direct contact with the hero, despite his use of the pythia as medium (Aes. Eum. 201-5); the use of the first person singular verb echēsa (l. 203) and epestellon (l. 205) indicates that prophetic possession by a god effectively removes the medium from the interaction between divine and mortal. Furthermore, while a god’s oracles may be considered deceptive, no Seer is held personally responsible. For example, Adrastus’ blame centres entirely on Phoebus, not the pythia who spoke the oracle (Eur. Supp. 137-46). This is in contrast to the reception of the Holy Man, who, as an interpreter of signs, could be attacked for providing a false account of the gods’ wishes (e.g. Aes. Sept. 377-83). Such faith in the medium is a reflection of the belief that the god is speaking directly through the Seer. This hints at an intimate relationship between the two, one that is witnessed as Cassandra directly addresses Apollo when she asks “why have you brought me here?” (Aes. Ag. 1138) and in her belief that Apollo himself is taking her prophetic garb (Aes. Ag. 1269; here following Sommerstein – n. 243 in his Loeb edition– and Fraenkel, 1950: v. 3, 519 in the belief that Cassandra is addressing Apollo, and not Agamemnon).
The acquisition of inspired prophetic ability is addressed clearly in tragedy (Aes. PV 248-50; cf. 698-9, which might support that, at one stage, human foresight was widespread and considered a blessing). The ability to foresee one’s death was an affliction, a disease (nosos) which Prometheus cured (following Sommerstein, n. 28 in his Loeb edition; cf. Podlecki, 2005: 169; Conacher, 1980: 42). In mythical times, all humans had this ability to see the future, but it was culled out of humanity. If one accepts that precognition, to the Greeks, was conceived as an inborn ability culled out of mortals, we may explain the rarity of the condition in the 5th century as a reflection of a portion of society retaining this characteristic.

Likewise, it may help explain the negative reception of Seers in society; they were thought to carry a disease of which other humans were cured. Seers appear to receive harsher treatment than Holy Men relying on an identifiable skill. The irrationality of inspiration and the ease with which the process might be falsified would leave the mantis in a position akin to a magos (parallels are drawn in the infamous passage of Oedipus Tyrannus 387 - following the understanding of Rigsby, 1976: 110 that in this passage the term implies ‘charlatan’ rather than religious fraud). The Seer was similarly mistrusted by the community and there was a perception of something unnatural in his/her behaviour: “nothing that is mortal is possessed of the prophetic art” (Soph. OT 708-9; cf. Aes. PV 248). The reception Cassandra received as agyrtria (Aes. Ag. 1273), in this use to be considered with its derogatory undertones (Fraenkel, 1950: v. 3, 591), reflects the suspicion which would follow the Seer.

Thus, the distinctions between manteis relying on a technical skill and those who practice with an inborn ability can be found in their modes of communication and reception. Seers can be seen to have played no advisory or sacrificial role in Greek tragedy; this also contributes to their differentiation from Holy Men. Despite their similarities in reception and terminology, it is clear that Seers and Holy Men were distinct from one another in tragedy and the wider Greek world.

The Peddler

The title ‘Peddler’ refers not to any specific individual present in tragedy, but rather to the category of mantis which most Seers and Holy Men are suspected to belong.
Whilst there is truth to the statement that it is the wrongheaded characters of tragedy who abuse *manteis* (Mikalson, 1991: 281, n. 70; e.g. Oedipus, Creon, and Pentheus), there are more neutral characters who express their distaste for these individuals, such as Achilles (Eur. *IA* 956-8), servants (Eur. *Hel*. 744-6), and choruses (Eur. *Hel*. 956-8). Broadening the source criteria similarly demonstrates this. Thucydides (8. 1. 1) recounts the anger directed towards *chrēsmologoi* and *manteis* in the wake of the Sicilian expedition. Isocrates (19. 5-7) embellishes his story so his audience consider monetary gain the primary motivation for *manteis*. Xenophon (*Anabasis*. 6. 4. 13-6) relates the growing suspicion which surrounded a *mantis* as omens continued to be unfavourable. Smith also catalogues the numerous slurs directed at *manteis* in Aristophanes (Smith, 1989; see other examples in Morrison, 1981: 106-9). The criticism levelled at *manteis* throughout Greek tragedy is an extension of that found in Classical Greek society, and thus cannot be discredited as inane rumblings of morally degenerate characters; the morality of the characters verbalising these insults does not diminish their weight.

Frequently, the *mantis’* motives are suspected of being contrary to the desires of the other characters. This is most explicitly demonstrated in Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes* (377-86) when Tydeus, “screaming like a snake hissing at midday”, belabours Amphiarous with insults, “saying that he is cringing before death and battle through cowardice”. This treatment of *manteis* is not isolated to tragedy, but also features in the *Iliad* (1. 106ff.), and reflects the misconception that *manteis* are working towards their own ends. Furthermore, Agamemnon’s kind treatment of a *mantis* (Aes. *Ag*. 184-7) is deliberately in contrast to the above passage of the *Iliad*, indicating that he is not behaving towards the *mantis* as most would in the same circumstances (Fraenkel, 1950: v. 2, 115). Reception of these individuals could be so negative that some characters would simply wish death upon them (Eur. *IT* 531-3). Beyond suspect motives, *manteis* are also denounced as profiteers intentionally misreading or fabricating omens. Widespread scepticism of augury may be attributed to wider scepticism in the community, stemming from the existence of false prophets peddling oracles or the evasiveness of professional *manteis*. References to profiteering amongst *manteis*, both Seers and Holy Men, are present in Euripides’ *Bacchae* (255-7): “you want to introduce this new divinity to mankind and read his bird signs and entrails and take fees”, Sophocles’ *Antigone* (1033-47): as Creon tells Teiresias to make his money but to leave the corpse, and asks whether he has been bribed (1077-8), and in *Oedipus Tyrannus* (387-8), where Teiresias only has sight where it concerns profit. Perhaps the best indication of the inherent distrust
associated with *manteis* is in Sophocles’ *Antigone* (1055), where *manteis* are blasted as “an avaricious race”. Teiresias’ known hoarding of prophecies (Eur. *Phoe. 766-7, 838-9*), and their availability to be distributed on request, demonstrates the plausibility of such fears: any collection and redistribution of easily falsified wares may be conceived as a money-making venture. Accusations of profiteering directed at Teiresias (Eur. *Bacch. 255-60; Soph. Ant. 1033-47, OT 387-8*) reflect a common fear throughout tragedy and the ancient world. Teiresias’ dependence on omens allowed for the possibility of fraud and misinterpretation, a confronting prospect to those relying on his words.

Distinct from criticism for falsifying portents for profit is commentary on the lack of skill truly involved in a *mantis*’ art. This sentiment is demonstrated in several famous passages from tragedy: Euripides’ *Helena* (744-57) states that all prophets are liars, and asks “why do we consult Holy Men? No, one should sacrifice to the gods and ask for blessings and leave prophecy alone... No idle man ever got rich by looking at burnt offerings”, and *Hippolytus* (1057-9) states “this tablet includes no divination by lot... as for the birds that fly above my head, I bid them good day!”. Odysseus in Euripides’ *Philoctetes* (F795) similarly questions their motives: “The man who vaunts knowledge of the gods knows nothing more than how to be persuasive in speaking” (one may also make examples of Eur. *IA 520-1* and Soph. *Ant. 631*). This doubt in the reality of divination as a technical skill is further hinted at through Euripides’ *Medea* and *Hecuba*.

> When a woman comes into the new customs and practices of her husband’s house, it is necessary for her to be a *mantis*, since she has not learned it at home.

*Medea 238-9*

> I am not, you know, a seer who without hearing could search out the path your thoughts are taking.

*Hecuba 743-4*

The passage of *Medea* may be interpreted in two ways. Those with faith in *manteis* would consider such a statement to be, in effect, meaning that a woman must look for the smallest signs and interpret their meaning in order to gain some knowledge of her new household. Alternatively, this passage may give some indication of the extent of doubt in the public; a girl has not learned of different customs at her own home, and with no way of learning how
to act she is forced, like a *mantis*, to guess. The excerpt from *Hecuba* holds similar connotations. Again, the passage may imply that *a mantis* could engage higher senses to ascribe the truth. Equally, however, it could be interpreted as a slight against *manteis* who, without any form of evidence, could claim to understand signs. Given the established scepticism present in Greek tragedy regarding the plausibility of mantic skill, the second interpretations of each excerpt may reflect the true undertones of popular opinion. Certainly playwrights were not above inserting criticism in response to popular opinion; the caustic charges in *Helena* were in response to the Athenian debacle in Sicily (Mikalson, 1991: 97).

The suspicion and doubt which followed *manteis* throughout tragedy provides some indication of how mantic skills were utilised by unscrupulous individuals in wider Greek society. Insults hurled at *manteis* and doubts voiced over the credibility of their practices reflected a very real fear; while the far reaching consequences of false interpretations, in some ways, justify the criticism levelled at *manteis*, for it would be easy to influence significant events by providing false omens. Although Greek tragedy itself does not feature any Seers or Holy Men with ignoble intentions, the consistency of malice gives a clear impression of those peddling their services from door to door – they are perceived as profiteers, cowards and frauds. This category, unlike the first two, does not serve as a consistent method of translating the term *mantis* in tragedy (though it serves in wider contexts); rather, it serves as a final category to convey the meaning of the term to others.

**Conclusion**

The main points of the above study may be summarised as follows. (1) The *manteis* present in Greek tragedy reflect the presence of three categories in wider Greek society: Holy Men, Seers and Peddlers. (2) Holy Men are predominantly concerned with divination by a technical skill (ornithomancy, extispicy), yet are not limited to this function, as they clearly take on the role of advisors and religious representatives. Seers are inspired with foreknowledge and rarely appear to serve in advisory capacities as the Holy Man frequently does; others are to interpret their words and make use of them. Peddlers comprise the underbelly of divination; though no *mantis* in tragedy exhibits the characteristics of this group, the suspicion which follows *manteis* clearly demonstrates the presence of greedy frauds. Thus, (3) English rendering of the term *mantis* as diviner or prophet without due consideration of context is inadequate due to the necessity for explaining ‘exceptions’ (in order to account for their
inherent piety, fraudulence, or divine associations). On this basis the above mode of conceptualising *manteis* is found to create a much clearer image of these individuals on a fundamental level without the necessary exceptions and elaborations required by restrictive definition.

**Reference List**


Mikalson, J. D.,


