

## Enter Mercury, Sleeping: Delivering Prayers on the Early Modern Stage

Chloe Kathleen Preedy

Scenes of prayer are common in early modern drama, often serving a significant theatrical or narrative function.<sup>1</sup> A related, but less remarked, phenomenon is the prevalence of divine messenger figures in the plays of this period. Various Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas feature prophets who deliver supernatural predictions, interpret omens, or read portents; contain allusions to intermediary saints; or even bring good and evil angels onto the stage, as in Christopher Marlowe's early modern tragedy *Doctor Faustus*. Among these diverse references, however, one character stands out, as perhaps the most famous of all divine messengers: the Greco-Roman god Hermes or Mercury.

Mercury is invoked in numerous plays of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and appears as an on-stage character in several works. Yet despite his fictional popularity, the Mercury of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is not always the quick-witted deity of classical tradition. Instead, Mercury is frequently represented as an absent, incompetent, or indifferent emissary. While the gods of Greek and Roman mythology were far from infallible, this focus on Mercury's specific shortcomings as a divine messenger also speaks to more immediate sixteenth-century concerns about the nature of prayer. In particular, the dramatic representation of the messenger-god in late Elizabethan drama seems to express a certain degree of anxiety about the difficulties of communicating with heaven, perhaps in response to on-going contemporary debates about what constituted true or effective prayer: thus *The Arraignment of Paris*, *Dido Queen of Carthage*, and *Troilus and Cressida* all expose Mercury's failings as an intermediary between mortals and the gods.

Originally known in ancient Greece as Hermes, the Greco-Roman god Mercury was remembered in Elizabethan England as the classical patron of thieves, merchants and scholars; a quick-witted trickster famous for his clever ruses, his eloquence, and his otherworldly interest in dreams and the afterlife. Mercury's name had also become linked in medieval times with the alchemical metal mercury or quicksilver, a central catalyst in transforming base metal to gold.<sup>2</sup> The metal's alchemical significance shaped corresponding allusions to Mercury in hermetic texts discussing the metaphysical transmutation of the soul,<sup>3</sup> allusions which acknowledge Mercury's

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed study of prayer scenes in Shakespeare's drama, see Joseph Sterrett, *The Unheard Prayer: Religious Toleration in Shakespeare's Drama* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Ramie Targoff, 'The Performance of Prayer: Sincerity and Theatricality in Early Modern England,' *Representations*, 60 (1997), 49-69. See also Daniel Swift in *Shakespeare's Common Prayers: The Book of Common Prayer and the Elizabethan Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See Joseph A. Porter, *Shakespeare's Mercurio: His History and Drama* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 37, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Frances A Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1964), esp. pp. 44-116.

reputation for eloquence as well as his symbolically charged function as mediator between life and death: in the Greco-Roman belief system, it was Mercury who conducted souls to the place of the dead. Mercury's mythological role in leading the soul on its final journey sheds an interesting light on his early modern reception; under a Protestant belief-system which denied the existence of purgatory, the liminal space between life and death that Mercury had occupied was drastically circumscribed. Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* suggests that the Protestant denigration of purgatory as a poetic fraud led to increased ambivalence about the existence and provenance of ghostly spirits in early modern England;<sup>4</sup> in the same way, Mercury's links to the shadowy region between life and death perhaps exacerbated an existing, classically inspired, tendency to associate him with fraud and deception. Indeed, mainstream sixteenth-century Christian thinking held that the pagan Greco-Roman gods had been, at best, amoral elemental spirits; at worst, human con-artists or demons sent to trick men and women into damnation.

Despite the self-evident fact that the Greco-Roman pantheon was not easily reconcilable with a monotheistic Christian tradition, however, early modern writers regularly allude to classical deities in a Christianised context, effectively using the name Jupiter (also Jove) as a poetic short-hand for Christian Jehovah. In the verse allegory *The Travayled Pylgrime*, for instance, the translator Stephen Batman describes how 'mightye Jove celestiall' created Adam and Eve 'in Eden grounde', introducing the name Jove within an indisputably Christian context, while England's future king James VI of Scotland addressed his own sonnets to 'Jove, as greatest God above the rest'.<sup>5</sup> During a period when it was illegal to represent God on stage, such replacement tactics were particularly common in dramatic writing: Marlowe's tragic hero Faustus, for instance, repudiates his Protestant God and admits he has 'incurred eternal death / By desp'rate thoughts against Jove's deity' (A-text 1.3.90-1).<sup>6</sup> Against this theatrical background, Mercury's classical role as messenger to the gods acquires an intriguing resonance: within a referential system in which the name Jupiter could allude to either the Greco-Roman deity or to Christian Jehovah, Jupiter's messenger Mercury might equally come to signify the process of communication between the Christian believer and his or her God. Thus in Edmund Spenser's 1591 elegy to Sir Philip Sidney, Mercury descends from heaven to collect Sidney's soul; an action that conflates his mediating role between life and death with his status as divine messenger:

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Batman, trans., *The travayled pylgrime* (London: Henrie Denham, 1569; STC 1585), Sig. B2r; James I, King of England, *The essayes of a prentise, in the divine art of poesie* (Edinburgh: Thomas Vautroullier, 1584; STC 14373), Sig. A3v.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus: A- and B-texts (1604, 1616)*, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 399-413.

At last me seem'd wing footed Mercurie,  
From heaven descending to appease their strife,  
The Arke did beare with him above the skie,  
And to those ashes gave a second life,  
To live in heaven, where happines is rife.<sup>7</sup>

Spenser's poetic vision of Mercury's descent belongs to an English Protestant tradition that idolised Sidney, and casts the escorting deity in a positive light. Elsewhere in his writings, Spenser presents Mercury as the champion of rightful authority; an envoy who, on Jove's command, acts to expose political and religious abuses (*Prosopopoia*, ll. 1257-1318), reminds an absent monarch of his responsibilities (*Prosopopoia*, ll. 1319-32), and defends the throne of the moon goddess, Cynthia (*The Faerie Queene*, 'Mutabilitie', VI.16-18).<sup>8</sup> When Mercury is invoked in early modern drama, however, it is more commonly within a context of anxiety about the limitations of and restrictions placed upon interaction between the mortal worshipper and his or her god. Indeed, theatrical allusions to Mercury suggest a contemporary preoccupation with silence and unresponsive listeners. Since Protestantism advocated direct communication between the pray-er and God, with extremists stressing in addition that prayer should be private and spontaneous, the question of how to interpret God's response troubled many early modern believers. Thus the plays of this period depicted the anxiety of sinners who believe that their hearts are too hardened to pray; who conclude that God is not listening; or who struggle to interpret the silence with which their prayers are met.<sup>9</sup> Within this context of anxiety about prayer and reception, the theatrical emphasis on a Mercury who is indifferent or even oblivious to mortal concerns is suggestive, especially in relation to the debates about confessional identity that raged in post-Reformation England.

Mercury features in several early modern religious tracts, with his pagan credentials cited to polemical effect. During Mary I's reign, for instance, the Catholic writer John Christopherson used Mercury's reputation for trickery to denounce his Protestant opponents as fraudulent deceivers: Christopherson accuses the Edwardian-era reformist preachers of having deluded English believers and '(as Mercurye did wyth Argos) not only brought the people a slepe, but also afterward put out theyr eyes, and made them starke blynde'.<sup>10</sup> A few years later, the future Elizabethan bishop John

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<sup>7</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Ruines of Time*, ll. 666-70, in William A. Oram et. al. (eds.), *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 225-61. Discussed by Porter, *Shakespeare's Mercutio*, p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Spenser, *Prosopopoia, or Mother Hubberds Tale*, in William A. Oram et. al. (eds.), *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 327-80; Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche (London: Penguin, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> See for example Alison Findlay's account of how issues of prayer and response are explored in *Doctor Faustus* and *A Woman Killed with Kindness* ('Prayer, Performance and Community in Early Modern Drama', [this volume](#)).

<sup>10</sup> John Christopherson, *An exhortation to all menne to take hede and beware of rebellion* (London: John Cawood, 1554; STC 5207), Sig. O1r.

Jewel attacked false (Catholic) orators in similar terms, charging them with learning from Mercury ‘how to be bold, to trick, to cheat, to perjure themselves, and by means of tricks, slanders, and flattery, how to confuse and darken the truth, laws both divine and human, equity, and justice’.<sup>11</sup> While these accusations are underpinned primarily by Mercury’s mythological reputation as the patron of eloquence and rhetoric, the god’s mythological function as a mouthpiece for the gods was also recognised by early modern polemicists. In 1618, for instance, the preacher Abraham Jackson linked Mercury’s music with God’s words, urging his ‘dear Christian Brethren’ to take heed and repent, ‘lest if with Argus, we listen too long to the Mercury pipe of Gods long-suffering, we be cast into a dead sleepe of securitie, to the utter seperation of our hearts from God’.<sup>12</sup>

Mercury is a deity in his own right, but, within the Greco-Roman belief system, he is also an emissary who carries the gods’ words to mortal worshippers. His messenger-status is intriguingly relevant to post-Reformation anxieties about prayer. While any individual Christian might worry about whether or not God was receiving their prayers, such concerns were potentially exacerbated at a state and Church level by the Protestant insistence that individuals spoke directly to God through prayer: a suggestion at odds with Catholic teachings about the mediating role of the presiding priest, or intercessionary saint. This theological distinction is evident in the religious writings of the period. Thus, in the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer, emphasis is placed on the refrain ‘we beseech thee to hear us’, and prayers are addressed directly to ‘almighty God’; whereas the Catholic treatise *Of Prayer and Meditation*, translated into English in 1582, stresses the role of the saints and describes prayer as a ‘petition we make unto almightie God’.<sup>13</sup> The Jesuit priest Robert Parsons similarly advised worshippers to request the Holy Spirit’s intervention in his well-known *Christian Directory*: an influential and widely read theological work, which went through multiple editions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> Throughout this period, England witnessed a fierce polemical conflict between the Catholic advocates of intercessionary prayer and the Protestants who rejected the mediating function of the saints as a false, “popish” sham,<sup>15</sup> while

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<sup>11</sup> John Jewel, ‘Oration against Rhetoric’, in Wayne A. Rebhorn (ed.), *Renaissance Debates on Rhetoric* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 161-72; p. 166.

<sup>12</sup> Abraham Jackson, *Gods call, for mans heart* (London: printed by T. Snodham for Roger Jackson, 1618; STC 14294), Sig. C5v-C6r.

<sup>13</sup> John E. Booty (ed.), *The Book of Common Prayer 1559: The Elizabethan Prayer Book*, The Folger Shakespeare Library (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), p. 70; Luis de Granada, *Of prayer, and meditation*, trans. Richard Hopkins (Paris: Thomas Brumeau, 1582; STC 16907), Sig. A3r.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Parsons, *A Christian directorie* (Rouen: 1585; STC 19354.1), Sig. Eee6r. This section is cut from Edmund Bunny’s Protestant adaptation, *A booke of Christian exercise*; instead, Bunny’s appended ‘Treatise tending to Pacification’ includes a repudiation of ‘praier to saints, and for the dead’ as practices ‘crept in of latter time, and not professed in al ages, nor of al Christian churches generally’ (London: N. Newton and A. Hatfield, 1584; STC 19355), Sig. Mm2v.

<sup>15</sup> Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, Sussex: Boydell Press, 1993), p. 105.

contemporary playwrights responded to such controversy with their own fictional episodes of contested prayer. In Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*, for instance, the Catholic murderer Mountsorrell angrily denounces his Protestant victim Seroune's efforts to address his God directly: 'Christ, villain? Why dar'st thou to presume to call on Christ, without the intercession of some saint? Sanctus Jacobus, he was my saint; pray to him' (8.10-12).<sup>16</sup>

As the Catholic model of prayer as a delivered petition hints, Mercury's role within the Greco-Roman belief system is potentially comparable to that of Catholic saints such as St. James. The messenger-god similarly conveys God's words to human believers, and provides a conduit whereby the latter's prayers ascend to the heavens. Yet, in early modern drama, this conduit is often threatened or disrupted by Mercury's own failings as a messenger. In the Elizabethan theatre, before audiences accustomed to interpreting classical references through a Christian framework, the staging of episodes that reveal Mercury's faults as a messenger potentially implies criticism of a religious system which channels access to God through intermediaries, rather than allowing a direct line to God.

### ***The Arraignment of Paris***

Mercury's function as an intermediary between the gods and mortals is clearly evident in George Peele's *The Arraignment of Paris*. Written in the mid-1580s, and performed at court in 1584, the children's drama narrates the story of the rivalry between the goddesses Juno, Pallas, and Venus, and how Paris, judging Venus the most beautiful, presented her with the golden apple of discord. This mythological version of the Trojan War's origins was well-known in early modern England. Peele, however, shows little interest in the battles that are to come; his play focuses on Paris's betrayal of his vows to his first love, the shepherdess Oenone, and questions whether Paris was right to award the golden apple to Venus. Ostensibly abstract, this debate on the nature of true beauty is in fact linked closely to the court context in which Peele's play was performed. Thus, in the final act, the academic question of whether majesty, wisdom, or love is most beautiful is resolved through an idealization of Queen Elizabeth I as the epitome of all three virtues; as Mark Benbow notes, the close of the play becomes a ritual in which Peele mirrors the real in the ideal.<sup>17</sup>

Peele's glorification of England's queen suggests that, despite his play's mythological setting, its themes might also speak to early modern sensibilities. At first glance, Mercury's role seems

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *The Massacre at Paris*, in H. J. Oliver (ed.), *'Dido Queen of Carthage' and 'The Massacre at Paris'*, *The Revels Plays* (London: Methuen, 1968), pp. 91-163.

<sup>17</sup> George Peele, *The Araynement of Paris*, ed. R. Mark Benbow, in Charles Tyler Prouty (ed.), *The Dramatic Works of George Peele* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), vol. III, pp. 1-131: p. 48.

conventional enough: he summons Paris to a heavenly court at which the latter's decision to award the prize to Venus will be appraised by the gods, in an apparently standard iteration of his messenger-function. In fact, however, Mercury's role in Peele's drama is unexpectedly circumscribed. According to the most influential versions of this myth, including those by Lucian and Ovid, it is Mercury who carries the apple and leads the goddesses to Paris; similarly, Roy Porter has shown that Mercury delivering the apple of discord was a popular subject for Renaissance artists.<sup>18</sup> But in Peele's version Mercury has been displaced, with the goddesses led instead by Rhanis: a companion of Diana, the goddess of chastity. Later, it is Diana who translates the play from the mythological to the actual by directing the quarrelling goddesses to a 'second Troy', 'Elizium', where they encounter a queen who proves

In state Queene Junos peere, for power in armes,  
And vertues of the minde Minervaes mate:  
As fayre and lovely as the queene of love:  
And chast as Dian in her chast desires.  
The same is shee, if Phoebe do no wronge,  
To whom this ball in merit doth belonge.

(5.1, ll. 1170-75)

Mercury, then, is displaced from his traditional role to make way for the mythological figure most closely aligned with the iconography of England's Virgin Queen: the Greco-Roman goddess Diana. Moreover, such dislocation may possess an additional Christian resonance, since Elizabeth I's appropriation of Diana's attributes overlapped with her iconographical accumulation of aspects conventionally associated with intermediary saints such as the Virgin Mary; the latter move buttressing the queen's claims to be Supreme Governor of the English Church. As a court drama, then, *The Arraignment of Paris* may be implicitly responding to the parallel Church shift from Catholic intercessionary prayer to Protestant modes of devotion: Peele's Mercury still acts as the messenger of the gods, but within a more limited sphere in which his performance is indirectly critiqued.

Mercury's first appearance in *The Arraignment* follows the betrayed Oenone's lament for her lost love Paris, who has abandoned her for Helen of Troy. Oenone appeals to Venus to recognise Paris's perjury, invoking the goddess of love's traditional responsibility for punishing faithless lovers; the expectation at this point is presumably that the newly arrived Mercury will convey her plea to the intended recipient. In fact, Peele seems to deliberately raise his audience's expectations that Mercury will champion Oenone's cause, as Oenone delivers her appeal to the gods while

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<sup>18</sup> Porter, *Shakespeare's Mercutio*, p. 31.

wearing a wreath of poplar: poplar's links to funeral mourning and the demi-god Herakles's successful trip to the underworld meant that it could be readily associated with Mercury, who leads mortals' souls into the afterlife. Mercury's entrance is placed immediately after Oenone's initial supplication to Venus, and he pauses on-stage to listen to her lamentations. Jove's emissary even informs Paris's distraught former lover that he, 'the messenger of heaven', has flown down

To cease upon the man whom thou dost love,  
To summon him before my father Jove,  
To answer matter of great consequence,  
And Jove himselfe will not be longe from hence.

(3.4, ll. 642-9)

Oenone, naturally enough, assumes that this 'matter of great consequence' is Paris's perjury in love, which she has just reported to the gods; she responds, 'Sweete Mercurie, and have poore Oenons cryes, / For Paris fault, unpierced th'unpertiall skyes' (3.4, ll. 650-1). But Peele, raising the expectation that her prayers will be delivered successfully, does so only to dash his spectators' hopes. It turns out that Mercury has barely listened to Oenone's appeal; he is dilatory in his pursuit of Paris but indifferent to the meaning of the song he pauses for, remaining deaf to mortal entreaty.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, his obliviousness to Oenone's suffering makes him callous, as he off-handedly advises the 'wench' that 'if thou wilt have physicke for thy sore, / Minde him who list, remember thou him no more: / And find some other game, and get thee gon' (3.4, ll. 658-62). The dismissive note – 'get thee gon' – sharply undercuts the expectation that Mercury will convey her words to Venus; his attention to Oenone proves self-interested, motivated by her potential value as a guide to lead him to Paris.

Mercury's failings as an envoy are further illustrated by his delay in locating Paris, the intended recipient of the message he carries. Mercury initially stops to ask Oenone for 'some newes...of the jolly swaine we seeke' (3.4) because he cannot find Paris himself, and his subsequent efforts to excuse this failure again underline how little attention he paid to her prayers; even as he visits Venus in person, he forgets Oenone's situation, remarking insensitively to her that: 'No marvell wench, although we cannot finde him, / When all to late the queene of heaven doth minde him' (3.4, ll. 658-60). Mercury's main purpose is, admittedly, to deliver a warrant to Paris and bear him up to heaven for trial, rather than act as a general messenger between heaven and earth. Yet he proves

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Prosopopoia*, in which Spenser emphasises his Mercury's timely descent: 'The Sonne of Maia soone as he receiv'd / That word, straight with his azure wings he cleav'd / The liquid clowdes, and lucid firmament; / Ne staid, till that he came with steep descent / Unto the place, where his prescript did showe.' (1257-62). Mercury is similarly efficient within *The Faerie Queene*: see for example 'Mutabilitie' VI.14.8-9 and VI.17.1-2.

equally ill-suited to the role of constable. The arraigned Paris is charged with partiality towards Venus, but Mercury himself seems equally guilty of such favouritism. He is polite to the point of ingratiating in his exchanges with the goddess of love, telling Venus that, if his wit or policy might profit Paris, ‘for Venus sake let him make bolde with Mercury’ (3.6, ll. 784-5). Far from making any effort to place charges against Paris on Oenone’s behalf, he comes close to competing with her for Paris’s affections, announcing during the trial that ‘I have not seene a more alluring boy’ (4.4, l. 826). Since Mercury also takes the role of prosecutor at Paris’s trial, divine justice becomes for a moment as circumscribed as the avenues of communication between mortals and their gods; in both instances, it is Mercury whose behaviour sows the seeds of doubt. Although Diana’s intervention ultimately secures a peaceful conclusion that implicitly lets Paris off the hook, Mercury’s failings remain significant: the messenger-god’s unreliability restricts communication between humans and the gods, and potentially raises doubts about the efficacy of mediated prayer. Certainly, in a contemporary environment where Protestant polemicists sought to discredit the Catholic model of intermediary prayer and Elizabeth I depicted herself as God’s representative on earth, it is perhaps telling that Peele’s Diana replaces the messenger-god Mercury as the medium of effective communication between the gods and Paris, negotiating between the real and the ideal.

### *Dido Queen of Carthage*

If Peele’s audiences witness the messenger of the gods sitting down for a rest, Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Nashe’s collaborative drama *Dido Queen of Carthage* develops this satirical point further. Their play opens with a striking tableau in which Jupiter fondles a young boy while Mercury (referred to by the Greek name Hermes) lies asleep on-stage. Like the sleeping Revenge of Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* or ‘sleepy’ Mahomet of Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*,<sup>20</sup> this dozing messenger illustrates the indifference of the gods to human affairs and their failure to intervene or enforce justice. Marlowe and Nashe’s Jupiter, the ruler of the heavens, even threatens to pluck Mercury’s wings for Ganymede’s entertainment and promises that

Hermes no more shall show the world his wings,  
 If that thy fancy in his feathers dwell,  
 But, as this one, I’ll tear them all from him,  
 Do thou but say, “their colour pleaseth me”

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, in Katharine Eisaman Maus (ed.), *Four Revenge Tragedies* Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 1-91, 3.15; Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great Part I*, in J. S. Cunningham (ed.), *Tamburlaine the Great, The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), pp. 109-216, 3.3.269. Cf. also Spenser, *Prosopopoia*, 1319-23.



(1.1.38-41)<sup>21</sup>

Jupiter's willingness to destroy Mercury's ability to mediate between the gods and humanity reflects his general inattentiveness to mortal concerns. As Aeneas's mother Venus alleges, Jupiter is perfectly happy to frolic with Ganymede, to 'sit toying there / And playing with that female wanton boy', while Rome's future founder faces shipwreck; Aeneas's piety and his frequent prayers to the gods matter little to this deity (1.1.50-3). Eventually, berated by Venus, Jupiter reluctantly stirs himself to action, commanding Hermes to act as his envoy:

I will take order for that presently.  
Hermes, awake, and haste to Neptune's realm;  
Whereas the Wind-god, warring now with fate,  
Besiege the offspring of our kingly loins,  
Charge him from me to turn his stormy powers  
And fetter them in Vulcan's sturdy brass,  
That durst thus proudly wrong our kinsman's peace.

(1.1.113-19)

Yet doubts about Jove's interest in his kinsman's predicament persist. The defensive tone of the opening line, and the fact that Hermes must make haste to rescue Aeneas, imply that Jupiter is acting quickly to cover up the fact that he had forgotten all about the Trojan prince. Mercury's own willingness to doze while his cousin drowned is equally striking; Aeneas may have appealed to the gods for rescue, but this divine messenger had no part in delivering his prayers. Instead, Mercury's negligence forces the goddess Venus to temporarily adopt the role of messenger, as she intervenes with Jupiter on Aeneas's behalf; Venus, like Diana, was sometimes referenced by Elizabeth I's royal iconography.

In *Dido Queen of Carthage*, as in Peele's *Arraignment of Paris*, Venus is one of the few deities who actively involves herself in mortal affairs. Yet when it comes to the emotional suffering of her son, Venus can be as callously indifferent as Marlowe and Nashe's Jupiter or Peele's Mercury. In Act 1, for instance, Venus announces bathetically that she will hide herself behind a bush while Aeneas 'spends himself in plaints, / And heaven and earth with his unrest acquaints' (1.1.139-41). Even when she appears to her son, disguised, she offers no immediate assistance and denies her true identity when he recognises her. As Aeneas tells his companions, such behaviour is 'too cruel'; he laments,

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<sup>21</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Dido Queen of Carthage*, in H. J. Oliver (ed.), *'Dido Queen of Carthage' and 'The Massacre at Paris'*, *The Revels Plays* (London: Methuen, 1968), pp. 1-90.

Why talk we not together hand in hand  
And tell our griefs in more familiar terms?  
But thou art gone and leav'st me here alone,  
To dull the air with my discursive moan.

(1.1.243-8)

Aeneas's failure to communicate directly with the gods, even when the god in question is his own mother, is itself intriguing in the context of post-Reformation anxieties about the nature of true prayer. Indeed, his plea to the goddess who forsakes him may even mirror the anguish of a Protestant believer trying to interpret the commands of a seemingly unresponsive God; Marlowe would later interrogate the Protestant experience of spiritual angst in greater depth within his tragedy *Doctor Faustus*.<sup>22</sup>

In *Dido Queen of Carthage*, a parallel instance of direct prayer is provided by Aeneas's rival in love and dramatic foil, Iarbus. Whereas Aeneas apparently abandons his efforts to pray directly to the gods after Venus's rejection, later communicating through the messenger-god Mercury, Iarbus is shown appealing directly to Jupiter in the second half of the play. Although he begins this prayer by ordering a blood sacrifice, a practice popularly associated in Protestant polemic with paganism, or occasionally with Islamic or Catholic rites, Iarbus's direct address to his deity has features which might also recall the Protestant model of prayer:

Eternal Jove, great master of the clouds,  
Father of gladness and all frolic thoughts,  
That with thy gloomy hand corrects the heaven,  
When airy creatures war amongst themselves,  
Hear, hear, O hear Iarbus' plaining prayers,  
Whose hideous echoes make the welkin howl,  
And all the woods "Eliza" to resound!

(4.2.1-7)

His direct address to a singular god who is imagined as compassionate and just is suggestive, while the repeated appeal to 'hear, hear, O hear' may recall the refrains of the *Book of Common Prayer*; Iarbus subsequently retreats into 'silent thoughts' of prayer, perhaps in response to contemporary anxieties about the unreliability of prayers performed before an audience (4.2.38-9).<sup>23</sup> Finally, the imagery of the resounding woods in the last two lines echoes Spenser's *Shepherdes Calender* and

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<sup>22</sup> See Findlay, 'Prayer, Performance, and Community', pp. 14-17.

<sup>23</sup> Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 7.

invokes England's 'Eliza' Elizabeth I, Supreme Governor of the Protestant state church.<sup>24</sup> However, the arguably parodic references to 'hideous echoes' and howling may hint that direct communication with the gods can sometimes be as dangerous as mediated prayer; Alison Findlay relates the aural 'shock waves' of these echoes to the upheaval caused by the English Reformations, arguing that Iarbus's prayer 'gives voice to the cultural traumas of separation and uncertainty experienced by the nation'.<sup>25</sup> The danger hinted at in this passage is certainly realised as the play continues. Although Iarbus's prayers are not immediately answered by Mercury's descent (in contrast to Marlowe's source-text, the *Aeneid*), Aeneas does eventually leave Carthage at Jupiter's command. Yet Iarbus's hopes of securing Dido's love are cruelly dashed when she commits suicide, leaving him to kill himself in turn. Marlowe, more sceptical than many of his contemporaries, introduces an episode which potentially broadens this play's questioning of contemporary forms of prayer to encompass Protestant practice as well as the Catholic intercessory model.

While characters are sometimes shown appealing directly to the gods in *Dido Queen of Carthage*, sustained attention is given to the intercessory model of prayer represented by Hermes. Indeed, the messenger-god's role in transmitting messages between mortals and gods is emphasised by one of the alterations Marlowe and Nashe make to their classical source; whereas Virgil's *Aeneid* also features Juno's messenger Iris, who guides Dido's soul to the underworld, Marlowe and Nashe's play does not. Since their Mercury is the only god who speaks to any mortal character in his own person, his appearance to Aeneas in Act 5 is particularly striking. But whereas in the *Aeneid* this encounter is a grand occasion, with the instructions that Mercury delivers in person subsequently reinforced through Aeneas's dreams, and quickly obeyed, much of the magnificence has been lost in *Dido*. Marlowe and Nashe reverse Virgil's sequence so that Aeneas claims to have seen Jupiter's messenger in a dream before his first attempt to leave Dido; Mercury's manifestation is necessitated by the Trojan prince's failure to follow instructions.<sup>26</sup> This shift makes Aeneas appear more dilatory and perhaps self-seeking, but also undercuts Mercury's authority; the dream he sends fails to inspire Aeneas sufficiently, so that the god of dreams must redeliver Jupiter's instructions in person to ensure compliance. The implicit scepticism this reversal of the sequence suggests about the reliability of dream-visions as a guide to God's will is intriguing in the Elizabethan context of attacks by Protestant polemicists on false prophecies,<sup>27</sup> particularly since Mercury's intermediary role

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<sup>24</sup> Patrick Cheney, *Marlowe's Counterfeit Profession: Ovid, Spenser, Counter-Nationhood* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 102-5.

<sup>25</sup> Findlay, 'Prayer, Performance, and Community', pp. 11-12.

<sup>26</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (London, Harvill Press, 1984), pp. 103-5: 4.222-81.

<sup>27</sup> For instance, the Earl of Northampton, Henry Howard, warns against the prophetic claims made by confessional adversaries in *A Defensative against the Poyson of Supposed Prophecies*, arguing that 'we must be diligent in weeding vp the causes of debate & strife within the Church, as diuersity in dreames, which would neuer haue an ende, if it were free, for euerie prating iacke to controwle the magistrate, vpon pretence of reuelation: which

between human believers and their gods and Aeneas's reputation as the founder of Rome potentially give their exchanges a Catholic tint. Mercury here adopts an intermediary role reminiscent of the Catholic saint or priest, acting as a conduit between the god Jupiter and the ostensibly pious Aeneas; however, the efficacy of such communication remains questionable.

The fact that Mercury originally appears to Aeneas in a dream sets the tone of their encounters. Aeneas is expected to listen, but not to enter into dialogue with Jupiter's messenger. This impression of a circumscribed, one-way avenue of communication is strengthened by Mercury's appearance in person. Aeneas greets his divine cousin courteously, but Mercury wastes no time on small-talk; instead, he launches straight into his mission:

Why, cousin, stand you building cities here  
And beautifying the empire of this Queen  
While Italy is clean out of thy mind?  
Too too forgetful of thine own affairs,  
Wilt thou so betray thy son's good hap?  
The King of Gods sent me from high heaven  
To sound this angry message in thine ears:  
Vain man, what monarchy expect'st thou here?  
Or with what thought sleep'st thou in Libya shore?

(5.1.27-35)

Here Hermes, dismissive of Aeneas's secular bonds and demanding that he 'must straight to Italy' (5.1.51-3), sounds not unlike the contemporary Catholic propagandists who urged English subjects to abandon the Protestant 'heretike' Elizabeth I, Dido's sixteenth-century namesake.<sup>28</sup> Mercury's speech, jarring with Aeneas's daydream of an idyllic future in Carthage, even borders on the tyrannical: Jupiter's past commands led to the founding of the Carthaginian kingdom whose validity he now, via his messenger Hermes, denigrates. This sense of divine tyranny was effectively emphasised in the 2003 Globe production, in which Dave Fishley's Hermes impatiently stamped Aeneas's sandcastle dream version of a new Troy flat when he entered to deliver Jupiter's orders.<sup>29</sup>

As the Globe performance recognised, Marlowe and Nashe's Mercury is as inconsistent and unreasonable as his master. Having delivered Jupiter's instructions that Aeneas 'think upon Ascanius' prophecy', Hermes then berates Aeneas for pausing to give orders for his son's

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falleth out at this daye in the publike schooles, and conuenticles of the wicked Annabaptists' (London: John Charlewood, 1583; STC 13858), Sig. L1r. See also John Foxe, *Actes and monuments*, 3 vols. (London: John Daye, 1583; STC 11225), Sig. N4v; Carole Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance: Politics and Desire in Court and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), esp. pp. 61-92; and Helen L. Parish, *Monks, Miracles and Magic: Reformation Representations of the Medieval Church* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> See for example William Allen, *An Admonition to the Nobility, English Recusant Literature*, 74 (1971), Sig. A3v-A4r.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Dido Queen of Carthage*, dir. Tim Caroll, Shakespeare's Globe (2003).

conveyance: ‘Spend’st thou thy time about this little boy / And givest not ear unto the charge I bring?’ (5.1.49-52). Ultimately, Jupiter’s messenger comes across as something of a bully, controlling Aeneas’s actions by threatening him with divine vengeance: ‘I tell thee thou must straight to Italy / Or else abide the wrath of frowning Jove’ (5.1.53-4). Moreover, the avenue of divine communication remains strictly one-way; there is no suggestion that Mercury intends to carry his cousin’s words or prayers back to Jupiter, and Aeneas’s weakly expressed but valid objection that he has neither sails nor tackling remains unanswered. The overriding impression is not one of mutual exchange between a pious hero and his gods, but of arbitrary commands reinforced by threats. In fact, Aeneas’s appeals for help are eventually answered not by the messenger of the gods or a divine intervention, but by his rival Iarbus. Yet, if Iarbus’s direct appeal to Jupiter has gained an indirect response in the form of Aeneas’s departure, the Gaetulian ruler is not happy in the outcome of his prayer. Instead it is Aeneas, following the arbitrary commands delivered by Mercury and granted little information about his task or opportunity to respond, who survives the play and seems most likely to achieve worldly success in its aftermath.

### ***Troilus and Cressida***

In *Dido Queen of Carthage*, Mercury proves an ineffective conduit between the gods and their mortal worshippers; himself at the mercy of a tyrannical Jupiter and Jupiter’s favourite Ganymede, this blustering messenger shows little interest in the plight of mortal characters. The only model of prayer that seems to offer any hope of successful communication is the direct, internalised line to God favoured by Protestant theologians - and, even then, Jupiter responds only insofar as he pursues a master-plan that was already predetermined when the play began. Moreover, Iarbus as communicant hardly profits from the fulfilment of his prayers; if he is listening at all, Marlowe and Nashe’s god has a darkly twisted sense of humour.

Shakespeare took a similar interest in the messenger-god Mercury in his own plays, invoking him by name in nine works. Shakespeare’s Mercury is regularly characterised as a messenger, Jove’s herald, and features as a mediating figure between life and death, heaven and earth. References to the Greco-Roman god are particularly common in Shakespeare’s late Elizabethan works: in *Titus Andronicus*, for instance, Mercury is one of the deities whom the Roman general Titus addresses in his winged prayers (4.3.56).<sup>30</sup> The most suggestive reference to Mercury in a context of prayer, however, occurs in another of Shakespeare’s late Elizabethan dramas: *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1601).

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<sup>30</sup> William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Alan Hughes, New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Here, Mercury is associated with ‘serpentine craft’ in a play which, like *The Arraignment of Paris* and *Dido*, narrates the perjury of a faithless lover.<sup>31</sup> Jove’s envoy, already famous in contemporary drama for his cunning rhetoric and clever sleights of hand, is now specifically associated by Shakespeare with a context of broken pledges and fraudulent vows. The connection implicitly tarnishes Mercury’s status as a messenger: for, if this god is persistently associated with falsehood, how can we (as readers and listeners) trust his words? Moreover, the potential for duplicity that is attributed to a divine intermediary who carries petitions between mortals and gods has especially provocative implications in *Troilus and Cressida*, a play that re-enacts what is perhaps the most archetypal literary instance of feigned prayer: the building of the wooden horse of Troy, a military device that masquerades as a sacrifice to Neptune. The deceptive external appearance of this horse, which allows the Greek soldiers to infiltrate Troy by concealing themselves inside, offers an apt analogy for early modern fears about the potential falsity of external performances of prayer.

It would be misleading to suggest that the primary significance the wooden horse of Troy held for early modern readers and audiences was as a symbol of the disjunction between external performed prayer and inner belief. Nonetheless, it is intriguing that Thersites identifies Mercury, the bearer of prayers, with ‘serpentine craft’ in a play set during the Trojan War; a similar connection is drawn in *Dido Queen of Carthage*, in which Aeneas describes the traitor who convinced the Trojans that the wooden horse was a sacrifice to Neptune as ‘a man compact of craft and perjury, / Whose ticing tongue was made of Hermes’ pipe, / To force an hundred eyes to sleep’ (2.1.141-6). Thus, in both *Dido* and *Troilus and Cressida*, Mercury’s fraudulent words are potentially associated with the false performance of prayer. This perhaps tentative connection is strengthened by the fact that, in *Troilus and Cressida*, Thersites invokes Mercury’s ‘craft’ within his prayer to the gods, as he contrasts the physical victories achieved by Ajax and Achilles with the inner cunning of his own quicksilver words:

O thou great thunder-darter of Olympus, forget that thou art Jove the king of gods,  
and Mercury, lose all the serpentine craft of thy caduceus, if ye not take that little little  
less than little wit from them that they have, what short-armed ignorance itself knows  
is so abundant scarce it will not in circumvention deliver a fly from a spider without  
drawing their massy irons and cutting the web.

(*Troilus and Cressida* 2.3.6-14)

Thersites’s distinction between the efficacy of the soldiers’ blows and his verbal appeal to the gods is noteworthy, especially since in Shakespeare’s play physical force is so much in evidence; there is

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<sup>31</sup> William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. Anthony B. Dawson, New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.3.12.

no real indication that Thersites's prayers are ever answered. In this instance, however, the gods' failure to respond might be attributed to the flawed nature of Thersites's prayers. Although his closing repetition of 'Amen' and his own statements emphasise that he is at prayer (2.3.16, 30-2), the form and subject-matter of his devotions is, from a Christian perspective, distinctly suspect. As Thersites himself puts it, 'I have said my prayers and devil Envy say "Amen"' (2.3.16-17); thus the fact that he prays in envy and anger (two deadly sins) may explain the lack of divine engagement. The prophetess Cassandra later confirms that 'the gods are deaf to hot and peevish vows', 'polluted off'rings, more abhorred / Than spotted livers in the sacrifice' (5.3.16-18); Thersites's prayer that his tormenters be afflicted with 'spotted' venereal disease is certainly in keeping with this idea of pollution.

If Thersites's appeals are a corrupt form of prayer, however, the distinction drawn by Apollo's priestess complements this play's broader concern with the relationship between false appearance and inward reality. In particular, Thersites's prayer may invite Shakespeare's readers and spectators to distinguish between the syntactical features that characterise his words as prayer and their 'polluted' content. Such a preoccupation with the nature of true prayer seems to permeate Shakespeare's play. Before falling to his prayers, Thersites mocks the inspirational model that Protestants sought to promote, telling Ajax that he would 'rail thee into wit and holiness, but I think thy horse will sooner con an oration than thou learn a prayer without book' (2.1.13-15); Thersites's own private orisons, riddled with envious and 'peevish' thoughts, may in turn illustrate the dangers of allowing foolish, weak, or amoral characters the freedom to pray independently.<sup>32</sup> Hector, one of the play's more positive characters, perhaps also alludes indirectly to this debate over the nature of true prayer when he warns his fellow princes that 'tis mad idolatry / To make the service greater than the god' (2.2.55-6). While the immediate purpose of Hector's statement is to caution the Trojans against prizing Helen too highly, his words might also reflect a contemporary context in which Protestant polemicists accused Catholics of valuing ceremony above the service of God. Hector's warning against idolatry in love acquires an additional resonance in Act 4, when Troilus casts his affection for Helen's dramatic counterpart Cressida as a form of worship; delivering Cressida to the Greek emissary Diomedes, he warns Paris to 'think it an altar and thy brother Troilus / A priest there off'ring to it his own heart' (4.3.6-9). Moreover, Troilus's worship of Cressida is itself based on deceptive external appearances; he assumes that because Cressida is fair she must be true, but her promises of eternal fidelity ultimately prove false. The language of prayer in *Troilus and Cressida* is thus persistently associated with the gap between external truth and

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<sup>32</sup> During this period, the desire to prayer without a book was particularly associated with the extreme Protestant opponents of the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer. See Targoff, *Common Prayer*, 37-8.

internal reality, in a way that evokes both the ‘serpentine craft’ of the messenger-god Mercury, and a post-Reformation religious context in which the Greco-Roman deity might stand for the concept of mediated prayer: an intercessionary model associated with Catholicism, which Elizabethan Protestants accused of promoting external performance above inner conviction.

### **Conclusion: The Jacobean Mercury**

As sixteenth-century England moved gradually away from a Catholic model of intermediary prayer, and a mediated journey to death via the liminal region of purgatory, towards a Protestant model which ruled out the existence of purgatory and the efficacy of saintly mediation, and insisted instead on direct communication with God, Mercury becomes associated with failure: in particular, the failure to communicate. The plays I have discussed in this chapter apparently respond to contemporary debates about the failure of mediated prayer through their representations of the messenger-god Mercury: in the drama of late Elizabethan England, Mercury becomes an inept, indifferent, or virtually absent figure. His mediating function is circumscribed to the point where he barely listens to the mortals he interacts with, becoming instead a one-way vehicle for the commands of an authoritarian deity. The callous indifference that Mercury regularly displays towards suffering human characters in the plays of this period complements the often tyrannical behaviour of the god he speaks for; intent on having their commands obeyed, these deities are deaf to prayers that do not match their agenda. Moreover, Mercury is associated in all three plays, and in particular *Troilus and Cressida*, with fraud, perjury, and deception: Shakespeare’s ‘serpentine’ deity is credited with a pronounced, and potentially demonic, affinity for lies. Thus Mercury the messenger-god begins to falter and fail on-stage, in a series of plays written as faith in the intercessional power of the Catholic saints steadily faded in an increasingly Protestant England.

If *The Arraignment of Paris*, *Dido*, and *Troilus and Cressida* are broadly consistent in their depiction of Mercury’s failings, however, there is one notable exception to this trend: Ben Jonson’s *Cynthia’s Revels*, another late Elizabethan drama. At the start of this work, Mercury is shown removing Echo’s voice, in a way that initially suggests a forcible silencing of prayer: after a revived Echo has lamented her unhappy state for approximately sixty-five lines, Mercury tells her that ‘thy speech / Must here forsake thee, Echo, and thy voice, / As it was wont, rebound but the last words’ (1.2.105-7).<sup>33</sup> As the term ‘wont’ signals, however, the role played by Jonson’s deity is not as oppressive as it might at first appear; it was Mercury who, at the start of this scene, assisted Echo to temporarily ‘Arise,

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<sup>33</sup> Ben Jonson, *Cynthia’s Revels, or the Fountain of Self-Love (1600)*, ed. Eric Rasmussen and Matthew Steggle, in Martin Butler et. al. (eds.), *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).



and speak thy sorrows!' (1.2.14). In enabling Echo to supplicate the gods, Mercury fulfils the mission that he has been set by Jove: a task which he insists on completing before he will join in with Cupid's proposed disguise plot (1.1.85-95). Mercury's actions in this episode implicitly counter Cupid's earlier mocking catalogue of his attributes: 'my light feather-heeled coz, what are you any more than my uncle Jove's pander? A lackey that runs on errands for him and can whisper a light message to a loose wench with some round volubility' (1.1.18-21).<sup>34</sup> In reality, despite his reputation for thieving, Jonson's Mercury proves an unexpectedly reliable messenger; his satirical but entertaining comments on the play's action establish him as an informal chorus, and Cynthia entrusts the closing reformation of the play's gallants to his care, as the 'deity next Jove beloved of us' (5.5.251). In the 'Palinodia' that follows, characters even pray directly to Mercury, in a parody of the litany,<sup>35</sup> before being purged to a final state of 'grace' (39). Jonson's dramatic treatment of Mercury's competence and his standing as Jove's emissary is thus at odds with the approach adopted by other contemporary dramatists; this messenger-god can in fact be trusted to convey the prayers of mortals into the heavens. Jonson's distinctive characterisation of Mercury is suggestive, in light of the playwright's reported Catholic loyalties:<sup>36</sup> in the hands of a dramatist sympathetic to a theological model of intercessory prayer, the divine messenger Mercury is temporarily vindicated.

Nonetheless, the theatrical association of Mercury with failure remains dominant within the drama of the seventeenth century. Despite its title, Jonson's 1615 masque *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court* is already arguably less sympathetic to Mercury than *Cynthia's Revels*, and features a diminished version of the character.<sup>37</sup> The Greco-Roman deity is now characterised as a bawdy, clownish figure, who, having escaped from the gods who torment him by crawling through a furnace vent (15 SD), proceeds to run around the performance space until breathless (21 SD): an entrance that parodies Mercury's mythological ability to traverse liminal spaces (including in his role as psychopomp), as well as his reputation for speed.<sup>38</sup> The power in this scene rests instead with the spectators, to whom Mercury appeals for sanctuary from the alchemists who would consume and commodify his form: 'What between their salts and their sulphurs, their oils and their tartars, their brines and their vinegars, you might take me out now a soused Mercury, now a salted

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<sup>34</sup> Francis Beaumont's Mercury is similarly accused of carrying only 'wanton' messages, in *The Masque of the Inner Temple and Grayes Inne* (London: F[elix] K[ingston], 1613; STC 1664), Sig. B3v.

<sup>35</sup> Noted by Eric Rasmussen and Matthew Steggle in their editorial gloss (3).

<sup>36</sup> See Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. pp. 141-4. Donaldson dates Jonson's conversion to 1598, shortly before he wrote *Cynthia's Revels*.

<sup>37</sup> Ben Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated From the Alchemists at Court (1615)*, ed. Martin Butler, in Martin Butler et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewer for their suggestions about this seventeenth-century context.

<sup>38</sup> See also Jonson, *Mercury Vindicated*, pp. 69-71.

Mercury, now a smoked and dried Mercury, now a powdered and pickled Mercury' (43-6). Yet in spite of the implied reduction in the god's stature, Jonson's masque does not focus upon the failed delivery of messages. Mercury may report on Vulcan's ambition to 'tear the wings from my head and heels, and lute me up in a glass with my own seals' (91-2), which would presumably destroy this messenger's capacity to carry prayers to heaven, but the movement of the narrative is towards a conclusion that repudiates the Olympian sphere. Rather than return to the Greco-Roman pantheon at the end of the masque, Mercury instead pledges his services to 'the Sol and Jupiter of this sphere': Jonson's monarch, James I. In that sense, this masque may have more in common with Spenser's 1590s verse than with late Elizabethan stage representations of Mercury, as the messenger-god's potential affinity with spiritual prayer is superseded by a focus on the power of his royal patron.

Mercury again features as a central character in Francis Beaumont's near-contemporary *Masque of the Inner Temple and Grayes Inne* (1613). Focusing more extensively than Jonson's drama on Mercury's failings, this play is reminiscent of Peele's *Arraignement* and of *Dido Queen of Carthage*: like Marlowe and Nashe, Beaumont portrays Mercury as an inefficient, hectoring messenger. With Mercury's divine counterpart Iris introduced as a rival envoy who carries marital blessings in Juno's name, the masque centres on the ensuing conflict between the two messenger-gods. As Beaumont recounts in 'The Devise...of the Masque', Mercury and Iris 'meete and contend', 'vying one vpon the other' (B2r, B3r); their confrontation generates two anti-masque dances, which are characterised as a 'Confusion' of 'broken Musicke' (C3r, B2r). This soundscape recalls the traumatised, howling prayers of *Dido* (4.2.5-6), while the episode as a whole casts Mercury as a negligent emissary whose competitive behaviour delays the delivery of the gods' words. Although Iris is not entirely blameless, it is Mercury who initiates the contest by physically accosting Iris, whom he threatens to 'make thee daunce / Till thou forgott'st thy Ladies messages' (C1r). Mercury's subsequent assertion that he himself has 'neuer stai'd / Till his [Jove's] high will was done' is pointedly at odds with the time-wasting behaviour that the audience has witnessed (C4r). Moreover, this 'dissembling' Mercury's boasts of speed have already been undercut by his opening appearance, in which he enters behind Iris: his claim that 'My wings are nimbler then thy feete' is not borne out by Beaumont's staging of their encounter, which shows Mercury '*striving to ouertake her*' and thrice exhorting Iris to 'stay' her movements (B3v). While Mercury's competency as a messenger is critiqued, however, there is an important difference between this masque and late Elizabethan works such as *The Arraignement of Paris* and *Dido Queen of Carthage*. In Beaumont's drama, there is no indication that the intended recipients of Mercury's message interact directly with the

god(s): the interlocutory potential of prayer is further suppressed, even as the contextual significance of prayer itself fades in the absence of a staged supplication scene.

As these Jacobean court dramas illustrate, the issue of Mercury's performance as a divine messenger remained of interest to seventeenth-century authors. While Jonson's drama portrays the messenger-god in a less critical light than the works of his contemporaries, his depictions of the character are still not entirely positive; other seventeenth-century playwrights, such as Francis Beaumont, continued to expose Mercury's failings. The Mercury plays of the Jacobean period are less likely than the dramas of the late Elizabethan period to introduce Mercury as a character within the specific context of staged prayer; in that sense, their focus on the god's shortcomings is perhaps further distanced from contemporary anxieties about the communicative power of prayer. Yet although the representation of Mercury's flaws in these later plays may resonate less suggestively in relation to confessional disputes between Catholic and Protestant models of prayer than the late Elizabethan portrayals that focus directly on the god's failure to facilitate effective communication between mortals and gods, the Jacobean plays' broader interest in Mercury's abilities as a divine envoy remains of interest. Even within the drama of the late Elizabethan period, the anxieties hinted at by these portrayals of Mercury as an indifferent, negligent, or abusive interlocutor may not relate exclusively to the inter-confessional context in which Protestant dramatists denounced the Catholic faith. Instead, Mercury's failure to enable communication may also speak to a deeper cultural anxiety about the nature of prayer and reception, which developed at a time when polemicists violently debated the validity of rival religious practices: for, if a prayer does not reach the desired recipient, is it a true prayer at all? And, with so many voices clamouring to be heard, how can a mortal worshipper ensure (or even recognise) the successful delivery of his or her words?

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