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Editors
Apl. Prof. Dr. Annemarie Ambühl (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink (Universität Potsdam)
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger (Universität Trier)
Prof. Dr. Christine Walde (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

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Contact
Principal Contact
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de
Support Contact
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de

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FRANCES FOSTER
(Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge)

Gods and Magic in Megan Whalen Turner's *The Thief*

Abstract Megan Whalen Turner's series *The Queen's Thief* (1996–2020) centres on the political intrigues in a group of countries which are at once very like – but also very unlike – Bronze Age and archaic Greece threatened by a powerful Persian Empire. The first book in the series, *The Thief* (1996), begins as a political adventure haunted by stories of the gods. When those gods directly influence the action, the narrative changes from present political intrigue to a fantasy from the distant past. The mythology in *The Thief* reflects, imitates and distorts archaic Greek creation myths – stories about how the earth and sky were formed, the divine pantheon and heroes. I examine the presentation of this divine pantheon against the narratives about the gods in Hesiod, the Homeric hymns and Homer's epics. I evaluate how the supernatural element interacts with the largely political narrative of *The Thief*. In so doing, I explore how the text blends a 'classical supernatural' with a world that is like – but in many ways very unlike – Bronze Age and archaic Greece.

Keywords Greek gods; Mythology; Young Adult literature; Fantasy; Magic.

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THE WORLD OF *THE THIEF*

Megan Whalen Turner is an American author of young adult fantasy literature, best known for her series *The Queen's Thief* (1996–2020). This six-part series centres on the political intrigues in a group of countries which both resemble and contrast the ancient Mediterranean world of the second and first millennium bce, such as Bronze Age Hellenic societies, archaic Greek city states and the Persian Empire. The narrative focuses on the complex political relationships between these fictional countries and their powerful rulers. However, the narrative is also permeated by legendary stories about the gods and heroes from a rich mythology which forms a supernatural element behind the main action. The first book in the series, *The Thief* (1996), is largely a political adventure, in which the main characters are disguised to each other, to the narrator and to the reader, but reveal their identities as members of the royal elite at the end of the narrative. The story is told in the first person by one of the characters – the eponymous Thief – and he is an unreliable and manipulative narrator. When his identity becomes clear towards the end of the book, it is a startling surprise to the reader as well as the other characters.

However, despite its focus on political intrigue, *The Thief* is a fantasy. Halfway through the text the gods appear directly to the narrator, and they change from being distant figures of mythology situated in legend to become influencing forces in the present day, directly affecting the action and manipulating events. This changes the narrative from current political intrigue to a fantasy from the distant past. The mythology in *The Thief* reflects, imitates and distorts archaic Greek creation myths – stories about how the earth and sky were formed, the divine pantheon and heroes. I examine the presentation of this divine pantheon against the narratives of the gods in Hesiod's poems, the Homeric hymns and Homer's epics. I evaluate how the supernatural element interacts with the largely political narrative of *The Thief.* In so doing, I explore how the text blends a 'classical' supernatural with a world that is both like – and very unlike – Bronze Age Hellenic societies and archaic Greek city states.

THE LITTLE PENINSULA

The action of *The Thief* takes place in the Little Peninsula, which echoes the Hellenic peninsula both geographically in its position to the eastern side of the Middle Sea and in the names of the countries, places and people within it. Behind the action in *The Thief* lurks the powerful empire of the Mede, poised to take over any remaining independent states, including those in the Little Peninsula. The Mede empire features more prominently in the later books in the *Queen's Thief* series, where its divergences from its namesake country Media as well as its cultural and linguistic similarities to the expansive Assyrian and Persian empires become clearer. The map which was first published in the 2017 edition of *The Thief,* some 20 years after the text's initial publication, diverges significantly in its proportions from the map focusing on the Mede included in the fifth book of the series, *Thick as Thieves,* also published in 2017. The Little Peninsula is depicted as proportionally larger in the map from *The Thief* than the same landmass in the map published in *Thick as Thieves,* suggesting both maps represent local interpretations and perspectives of the landscape in relation to its neighbours.

The Little Peninsula itself comprises three independent states, each with its own monarch: Sounis in the northwest of the peninsula, Attolia in the south and Eddis in the northern mountains. The names of the three independent states are closely evocative of real places in (or near) the Hellenic peninsula – Attolia echoes both Aetolia and Anatolia, Eddis is reminiscent of Elis, and Sounis recalls Sunium, perhaps with a touch of Salamis. Equally, most characters from the Little Peninsula have names which are distinctly Greek, such as Sophos, Eugenides, Ambiades, Helen and Irene. Despite the phonetic resonances, the countries and their key characters bear no direct similarities to their Greek namesakes. The label indicating the land of the Magyar at the north eastern side of the peninsula hints at the tribes who populated modern Hungary, although the historical tribes did not arrive in Europe until the ninth century ce. There is a strong prehistory to the Little Peninsula, and the characters encounter walls and roads which appear to have been constructed long ago, such as a road 'paved with giant stones laid perfectly evenly'.[1] They claim that no one knows how the road was built since it was too long ago, but they know a legend suggesting these were built by Polyfemus, 'the giant with one eye'.[2] This giant, despite the similar-

1 Turner (1996) 76.

2 Turner (1996) 77.

ity of his name to the cyclops Polyphemus, appears to have been more civilised than his Greek variant, creating buildings for humans rather than eating them. This hidden history, with its accompanying legends, forms a rich backdrop to the ways in which the cultures of the countries develop.

Unlike their classical Greek counterparts, the states of Sounis, Attolia and Eddis are ruled by a monarch – Sounis has a king, while Attolia and Eddis each have a queen. Sophos is the nephew of the otherwise unnamed King of Sounis, and in a subsequent book, Sophos becomes the King of Sounis. Irene is the Queen of Attolia, while Helen is the Queen of Eddis. The existence of unmarried female monarchs marks out the social and gender hierarchy of the world of *The Thief* as different from fifth century Athens, but also unlike the more familiar structures from the Bronze Age as represented in the Homeric epics. Characters drink 'coffee that was thick with sugar'[3] and eat oranges, treating these foods as local, rather than imported, produce. However, the narrative provides no information about colonial lands where coffee and sugar extraction methods might have been developed, or an eastern emperor who might have bred orange citrus fruit from the naturally occurring yellow varieties. Equally, mechanical timepieces, stirrups and gunpowder all feature in this society, although it is otherwise technologically premodern and these technologies do not play a significant role in the plot. Thus, in spite of the existence of gunpowder, fighting still commonly involves swords in hand to hand combat, and those characters who fight have been trained in sword fighting.

The narrative is told by Eugenides, who is in fact the official Thief and cousin of the Queen of Eddis (his title is Queen's Thief), but he spends most of the narrative pretending to be a boastful uneducated street thief from Sounis. Thus, the narrative is told from a hidden perspective – Eugenides's real identity as an educated Eddisian royal is a perspective only available on a second reading of the text. Eugenides tells the story of how, in disguise as a Sounisian street thief, he orchestrated his own arrest and became a prisoner in the city. As part of Eugenides's prearranged scheme, the Sounisian King's magus subsequently hauls him out of prison and takes him on a quest to locate a legendary stone. Eugenides planned his arrest as a street thief because he knew that the magus needed a skilled – but politically powerless – thief to undertake this task.

3 Turner (1996) 111.

RELIGIONS: THE OLD GODS AND THE NEW

At the start of his story, Eugenides describes the city of Sounis and its history with the benefit of his educated perspective. He focuses on the ways the city has changed over time as he outlines how it is arranged from his viewpoint in his prison cell located in the city centre. He states that the prison stands at the summit of the hill on which the city was built, and that the 'only other building there was the king's home, his megaron', which had once been 'a true megaron, one room with a throne and a hearth' (*The Thief,* 4). Eugenides's historical account of the king's megaron recalls the structures used by Mycenaean rulers in the Bronze Age, where 'a major function of the Mycenaean megaron was to provide a throne room for a male ruler, the *wanax* attested in the linear B tablets'.[4] This image of a palace consisting of a single throne room differs from the more urban and complex structure of the city as Eugenides experiences it. He constructs a careful contrast between the historical and the contemporary city, where the agora has become the prison and the temple has been replaced by a basilica. He claims that by the time he ended up in the prison, most people had forgotten that the prison building had ever been anything else. His narrative alerts us to a religious change, as Eugenides informs us that the 'temple to the old gods [...] had been destroyed' in the past by invaders who in turn built 'the basilica to the new gods'.[5] Turner's choice of words echoes a change in religious architecture in antiquity. The Latin *templum* indicates a place or structure dedicated to a particular deity,[6] while *basilica* describes a building with double colonnades.[7] In the fourth century early churches were built with double colonnades and so *basilica* indicates a religious building in late Latin. Turner builds an unseen history into Eugenides's account of the religions and their practices through these word choices.

Nonetheless, we learn relatively little about the new gods. On their journey to locate the legendary stone, Eugenides claims to his companion Sophos that religion has nothing to do with belief. As he does so, he gives the reader a brief glimpse of the new gods who supplanted the old gods in Sounis and Attolia (but

4 Rehak (1995) 95.

5 Turner (1996) 4.

6 Lewis/Short (1879) 1850.

7 Lewis/Short (1879) 223.

not Eddis) when invaders came to the peninsula at some unidentified point in the past. The pantheon of the Nine Gods 'won the Earth in a battle with the Giants',[8] recalling stories of the battle between the Olympians and the Giants in the Gigantomachy. Since Eugenides is actually from Eddis, where the religion of the old gods continues, his perception of these new gods is unsympathetic: 'the First God spawns godlets left and right and his wife is a shrew who is always outwitted'.[9] His depiction of the First God's behaviour in creating many illegitimate children ('godlets'[10]), is reminiscent of Zeus, since he sired many minor gods and heroes. Equally, his description of the First God's wife recalls Hera's annoyance at Zeus's promiscuous behaviour. Eugenides gives a pragmatic rationale for religious practices, asserting that people enjoy feast days at the temple and that they pretend that a god 'wants the worthless sacrificial bits of a cow' so the people can eat the rest – 'it's just an excuse to kill a cow'.[11] This perspective echoes the views of scholars who reflect on the practicalities of sacrifice, since it is an 'economic calculation as well as a ritual obligation',[12] which importantly allows 'killing for eating' in addition to functioning as a social and communal act.[13] Eugenides provides an unusually analytical perspective on religions. His commentary on religious customs serves to distance them from the reader, making these practices feel like they belong to a distant past, meaningless for the present. This reflects our own reception of ancient cult practices as objects of study which may enhance our understanding of earlier societies and their world views. Within the narrative of *The Thief*, the narrator's emphasis on the practical and economic aspects of cult practice lures the reader into understanding the story world as ancient history. This makes the moment the gods appear feel more startling and unexpected.

Although these new gods are part of the contemporary religious practices of both Sounis and Attolia, they are never named in the narrative. We are told that they were imported by unidentified foreign invaders, and the people of Sounis

8 Turner (1996) 83.

9 Turner (1996) 83.

10 Turner (1996) 83.

11 Turner (1996) 84.

12 Bremmer (2007) 134.

13 Bremmer (2007) 144.

and Attolia 'converted to the invaders' religion' long ago,[14] honouring these gods in their city basilica. The new gods remain shadowy figures because they are not part of Eugenides's Eddisian culture. Instead, the old gods underpin the narrative. They feature both in the stories that Eugenides and his companions tell each other on their travels and in the narrative as a whole when they appear to Eugenides in dreams or directly, influencing the action at key moments. The old gods appear to be unrelated to the new gods, but they are very closely connected with the creation of the Little Peninsula and its landscape. The magus calls them the gods of the 'mountain country',[15] Eddis. He explains that the old religion contains 'an almost infinite pantheon, with a deity for each spring and river, mountain and forest'.[16] This echoes the way in which many lesser Greek deities 'personified specific features in the landscape or phenomena in the environment',[17] and they were often geographically limited to a particular settlement or region. The magus then describes a 'higher court of more powerful gods', presided over by a central divinity, Hephestia, the 'goddess of fire and lightning'.[18] His description makes this 'higher court' at first sound like the Olympian pantheon in relation to the localised minor divinities of specific geographical features. However, the old gods are not related to the Nine Gods from the new pantheon, and they borrow different aspects of Greek religious cultures and related near eastern traditions. Hephestia is the most powerful goddess of this pantheon and governs all the others including her parents who are the oldest divinities, the Earth and Sky. Larson points out that all Greek gods were connected with natural phenomena in some way, and so they were all 'nature deities'[19] to some extent. In this sense the new gods diverge abruptly from the old gods, since the former's relationship to the landscape is never explicitly stated.

14 Turner (1996) 69.

15 Turner (1996) 69.

16 Turner (1996) 69.

17 Larson (2007) 56.

18 Turner (1996) 69.

19 Larson (2007) 56.

HEPHESTIA AND CREATION MYTHS

The goddess Hephestia is a composite figure. She resembles several Olympians – her position of power equates her with Zeus and Poseidon, while her name echoes both Hephaestus and Hestia. However, her parentage of the Earth and the Sky situates her alongside the Titans, whose parents were similarly the earth Gaia and the sky Ouranos. Ken Dowden observes that the Olympians are a 'relatively new regime' in mythological history,[20] in contrast to Hephestia's position among the old gods. The Olympians are preceded by the Titans, whose parents in turn arise from either the Ocean (according to Homer[21]) or from Chaos (according to Hesiod[22]). Dowden suggests that, since Zeus is not a creator god, narratives of creation arising from Ocean or Chaos were themselves 'probably Near Eastern imports'.[23] Like Zeus, Hephestia is not a creator god, since her mother, Earth, takes on that role in creating both celestial bodes and geographical features. The Eddisian pantheon contrasts the male-orientated Olympians, since the supreme deity is a goddess. This is a reminder that the world of *The Thief* is not quite like the Hellenic peninsula in the archaic period. Hephestia also reflects, authorises and empowers the presence of unmarried female monarchs, the queens of Eddis and Attolia.

Ancient near eastern myths describing how a primordial being (usually a personified element of the cosmos) created other cosmic components and deities are widespread. For example, the Babylonian Epic of Creation (*Enuma Eliš*) describes how the Ocean Tiamat mingled with the freshwater Apsu to generate various pairs of gods.[24] The Egyptian god of the air, Shu, breathes (or sneezes) the cosmos and its components into existence. Greek cosmogony follows a similar pattern in the *Theogony,* as Hesiod describes how Gaia created Ouranos:

> Γαῖα δέ τοι πρῶτον μὲν ἐγείνατο ἶσον ἑωυτῇ
> Οὐρανὸν ἀστερόενθ', ἵνα μιν περὶ πάντα καλύπτοι,
> ὄφρ' εἴη μακάρεσσι θεοῖς ἕδος ἀσφαλὲς αἰεί.

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20 Dowden (2007) 46.

21 Hom. *Il.* 14,201.

22 Hes. *Theog.* 123

23 Dowden (2007) 46.

24 Foster (2005) 439.

> Gaia first gave birth to the starry Ouranos, equal to herself, to cover her all around, so that he would always be a steadfast abode for the blessed gods.[25]

Gaia creates Ouranos as an equal and a protector, even though this relationship does not last. In *The Thief,* Eugenides tells a creation story about the old gods which partially echoes Hesiod's version. His narrative makes Earth into the primordial being who has no companion and is therefore the creator god. In his story, Earth first created the Sun, who sent light during the day but 'at night [Earth] was alone'.[26] She then created the Moon for the night, but the Moon 'sent only part of her light and sometimes forgot entirely'.[27] Finally, Earth made the Sky:

> So [Earth] breathed out into the firmament, and she made the Sky. The Sky wrapped himself all around her and was her companion. He promised to stay with her always and Earth was happy.[28]

The behaviour of the earth in the two accounts is similar, although Eugenides's Earth creates other celestial bodies before creating the Sky. In Hesiod's narrative the purpose clause (ἵνα) explains the reason why Gaia creates Ouranos, but the verb καλύπτω (I cover) also contains more sinister meanings, suggesting that Ouranos conceals or hides Gaia, hinting at the later conflict between the two. By contrast in *The Thief,* the Sky spontaneously 'wrapped himself' around the Earth. The verb 'wrapped' suggests a more comfortable and supportive relationship, qualified by the Sky's promise to stay with the Earth. However, the Sky's promise is foreshadowed by the broken promises of the Sun and the Moon, also pointing towards a future conflict and their ultimate separation.

Graf notes that myths about the separation of earth and sky are widely attested in ancient cultures from Mesopotamia to Egypt, and that this separation usually involves violence.[29] Thus, when Tiamat is defeated, her conqueror splits

25 Hes. *Theog.* 126–8. All translations from Greek are my own.

26 Turner (1996) 80.

27 Turner (1996) 80.

28 Turner (1996) 80–1.

29 Graf (2007) 48.

her body in half to create the earth and the sky.[30] The Egyptian air god Shu lifts the sky goddess Nut high above the earth god Geb (for example, in the *Coffin Texts*[31]) and images often show Shu standing between Geb and Nut so that they cannot interact. In Hesiod's *Theogony*[32] Kronos violently separates Ouranos from Gaia after Ouranos hides monsters within her, and his actions enable the Titans to take over from the earlier generation of divinities. In the narrative Eugenides tells, the Sky and the Earth, like their Greek counterparts, argue violently and cause destruction, the Sky with thunderbolts, the Earth with earthquakes. However, the resolution of their argument does not result in their permanent separation. Instead, their eldest child Hephestia intercedes, taking over both powers to create peace: 'Earth gave Hephestia her power to shake the ground, and the Sky promised to give her his thunderbolts'.[33] This results in making Hephestia into the most powerful divinity and head of the divine pantheon, including her rule over her parents.

While Hephestia's parentage parallels her to the Titans, in many ways she resembles the Olympians far more closely. She gains control of both lightning and earthquakes, and this places her in a uniquely powerful position since it gives her supremacy over both her parents. Her dominion over the realms of earth and sky symbolises her ability to intercede, but it also allies her to several Olympian gods, making her more powerful than any single Olympian. The *Homeric Hymn to Poseidon* announces, 'Ἀμφὶ Ποσειδάωνα θεὸν μέγαν ἄρχομ' ἀείδειν|γαίης κινητῆρα' (I begin to sing of Poseidon, great god, shaker of the earth[34]). In the Homeric corpus Poseidon is frequently known by the epithet naming him as 'Earth Shaker', 'ἐνοσίχθων' (for example, in the *Iliad*[35]). When Hesiod lists the children born to Rhea and Kronos, Poseidon is only named as 'ἐρίκτυπον Ἐννοσίγαιον', the loud sounding Earth-Shaker.[36] This contrasts to Zeus, whose power lies in the sky, rather than in the earth and sea. Hesiod lists Zeus directly after Poseidon: 'Ζῆνά τε μητιόεντα […] | τοῦ καὶ ὑπὸ βροντῆς

30 *Enuma Eliš,* Tablet 4, 138–40

31 *Spell* 76 II,2; De Buck (1938); Faulkner (1973) 77.

32 Hes. *Theog.* 178–81.

33 Turner (1996) 100.

34 Hom. *h.* 22,1–3.

35 Hom. *Il.* 7,445.

36 Hes. *Theog.* 456.

πελεμίζεται εὐρεῖα χθών' (Zeus, wise in counsel, [...] by whose thunder the wide land is shaken[37]). However, the juxtaposition of the two powers suggests a conflict between them since Zeus's thunder shakes the land as much as Poseidon's earthquakes. Hephestia combines the powers of Zeus and Poseidon through her control of both earth and sky, thus resolving the rivalry between her two Greek counterparts. She is also linked to a volcanic mountain range, the Hephestial Mountains, and the Sacred Mountain in that range contains Hephestia's fire.[38] Through this volcano Hephestia is allied to the Olympian her name most closely reflects, Hephaestus. Hephestia's links to fire and peacemaking are also reminiscent of the other Greek divinity her name reflects, Hestia the goddess of the hearth. The various skills and dominions of the goddess Hephestia reflect the composite nature of the Greek gods and their counterparts from neighbouring ancient Mediterranean societies. These divinities have complex interrelationships with each other and with the cosmos.

Turner has described the way in which she draws on stories and objects from ancient cultures (such as earrings from Crete and the lion gate at Mycenae) to create places and objects in her fantasy world which echo the ancient stimuli.[39] This evocation presumes an audience who may have some familiarity, however basic, with ancient Greece, perhaps from their primary education. The composite nature of Hephestia draws on a reader's (perhaps half-remembered) awareness of Zeus, Poseidon, Hephaestus and Hestia, relying on the reader to make these connections. Each of these divinities carry associations of weight and power, conferring an impression of Hephestia as part of a similar pantheon. For readers less familiar with the Greek pantheon, Hephestia may even appear to be from the same pantheon, while other readers are rewarded for recognising her composite nature and its implications.

37 Hes. *Theog.* 457–8.

38 Turner (1996) 277.

39 Turner (2008) 149.

HEROIC CLEVERNESS

Specific archaic Greek values permeate the world of *The Thief,* drawn from mythological stories of gods and heroes. The *Homeric Hymn to Hephaestus* invites the Muse to sing of "Ἥφαιστον κλυτόμητιν', Hephaestus famous for skill[40]). The first half of the word κλῠτόμητις indicates fame or renown, but the second half signifies a quality which is a common attribute of Greek gods and their favoured heroes. Zeus in particular is 'μητιόεντα' (wise in counsel) in the *Theogony,*[41] literally, he has 'μῆτις'. This word indicates 'measure, skill and craft'[42], and is also the name of the goddess *Mētis* (Thought), the mother of Athena who was swallowed by Zeus while she was pregnant. In the *Hymn to Hermes,* the eponymous god of thieves has these qualities from birth as Zeus sires a shifty, wily child 'πολύτροπον, αἱμυλομήτην'.[43] Both words are compounds: πολύτροπος, literally 'much-turnings', comes to mean shifty or wily when applied to Hermes. There is no other recorded use of αἱμῠλομήτης in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* database – it is a compound word formed from αἱμύλος (wily) and μῆτις (thought), suggesting the cunning and changeability of the god. Hesiod describes both Kronos and Prometheus using a similar compound, ἀγκυλομήτης (crooked thoughts): 'θαρσήσας δὲ μέγας Κρόνος ἀγκυλομήτης' ('crooked thinking great Kronos had no fear'[44]) and 'μιν ἐξαπάτησε Προμηθεὺς ἀγκυλομήτης' ('crooked thinking Prometheus deceived him'[45]). In both cases, the word ἀγκυλομήτης still retains the key quality of μῆτις (thought) but is modified by ἀγκύλος, meaning bent or crooked,[46] suggesting that there is something devious and negative about their ingenuity. Prometheus deceives Zeus, while Zeus deceives Kronos, just as Kronos deceived Ouranos before him, but in the mythological narrative Zeus is more justified than Kronos or Prometheus. Nonetheless, an admiration of this type of cunning, craftiness and deceit is very typical in archaic Greek literature and mythology.

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40 Hom. *h.* 20,1.

41 Hes. *Theog.* 457.

42 Beekes (2010) 948.

43 Hom. *h.* 4,13.

44 Hes. *Theog.* 168.

45 Hes. *Erg.* 48.

46 Beekes (2010) 12.

The societies in the Little Peninsula value similar qualities of cunning and deception, both in their mythology and in the ways in which their royals behave. We learn that Hephestia has a half-brother demigod called Eugenides, who shares his name with the protagonist of the novel and later becomes the god of thieves. In the mythical stories, the demigod Eugenides is particularly renowned for the quality of 'cleverness', which enables him to disguise himself, hide and deceive the gods. These skills form an essential part of the narrative, since the Sky god promised to give his thunderbolts to Hephestia, but he breaks that promise by delaying and making excuses. Therefore, Hephestia and the Earth ask the demigod Eugenides to help retrieve (essentially, steal) the Sky's thunderbolts. We are told that the Earth had given cleverness to all mortals, but most especially to the demigod Eugenides, and she tells him that 'he must use his own cleverness if he was to acquire the attributes of the gods'.[47] Eugenides successfully disguises himself as a mole and a bird, deceiving the Sky and a nearby lake goddess, thereby acquiring the Sky's thunderbolts. He then uses his cleverness to bargain with the Sky, insisting that he would only reveal the location of the thunderbolts if the Sky allowed him to drink from the wellspring of immortality, enabling him to become a god himself. Eugenides thus becomes a god as a result of his cleverness, through theft and deceit.

In *The Thief,* 'cleverness' implies not only intelligence, but also trickery and cunning, qualities notably embodied by Odysseus through his epithet πολύμητις, another compound made up of πολύς (much) and μῆτις (thought). This quality allows Odysseus to maintain numerous disguises as well as to obtain or steal valuable items. Odysseus conceals his identity for much of his adventures in the *Odyssey,* for example, calling himself 'Οὖτις' (Nobody)[48] in the cave of Polyphemus, and pretending to be a beggar from Crete after he arrives in Ithaca. He steals sheep from Polyphemus, gains (and loses) a bag of wind from Aeolus, and acquires considerable treasure from the Phaeacians, because he is πολύμητις[49]. Odysseus embodies qualities of cleverness, cunning and deceitful thinking to such an extent that there are several Greek words signifying these traits in the text. He shares the skills of βουλή (ingenuity) and κέρδεα (cunning arts) with his

47 Turner (1996) 118.

48 Hom. *Od.* 9,366.

49 Hom. *Od.* 8,152; 9,1; *passim.*

patron Athena (Zeus also displays βουλή at *Theogony*[50]), and these skills are the ingenuity, cunning and craft which enables them to get what they want. When Odysseus arrives in Ithaca and meets Athena, they both initially maintain their own disguises until Athena reveals she recognises Odysseus. Athena acknowledges their shared skills when she talks to him:

> εἰδότες ἄμφω
> κέρδε', ἐπεὶ σὺ μέν ἐσσι βροτῶν ὄχ' ἄριστος ἁπάντων
> βουλῇ καὶ μύθοισιν, ἐγὼ δ' ἐν πᾶσι θεοῖσι
> μήτι τε κλέομαι καὶ κέρδεσιν·
>
> Both of us understand cunning arts. You're the best of all mortals in ingenuity and stories; among all the gods I'm famous for thought and cunning arts.[51]

Athena parallels their abilities in κέρδεα (cunning arts) while granting Odysseus βουλή (ingenuity) and μῦθοι (stories) in contrast to her own μῆτις (thought), although these words are linked to both characters elsewhere in the epic. Odysseus has a particular skill in telling stories, whether true or fabricated, since this is one of the ways in which he conceals his identity in several situations.

In *The Thief*, Eugenides the god becomes the god of thieves as a result of his cleverness, and – like Hermes – his skills are deceit and theft. These are two of the skills that *The Thief*'s narrator Eugenides shares with his namesake divinity, and other characters admire him for these skills. But he also shares with Odysseus the skill of ingenuity and the ability to tell stories. Like Odysseus, Eugenides spends the majority of the narrative in disguise, fooling the King's magus and his travelling companions as well as the reader. As he tells his story, he leads the reader to believe that he is an uneducated thief from Sounis who is arrogant and boastful. We learn that the magus of Sounis has selected him for his usefulness as an unknown local thief in order to steal the legendary stone (called Hamiathes's Gift) for him. However, only towards the very end of his narrative do we finally discover that Eugenides is in fact the famous Thief of Eddis, and cousin to the Queen. Then we understand that he boasted about his abilities as a thief because he intended to be caught by the magus and wanted the magus to use him to steal the stone. He engineered this because he wanted to steal the

50 Hes. *Theog.* 465.

51 Hom. *Od.* 13,296–9.

stone himself for the Queen of Eddis, but he needed to manipulate the magus for his own ends since only the magus knew where the stone lay hidden. Eugenides describes how he stole the stone from a mysterious and secret underground temple, and when he came out of the temple, he was required to hand it over to the magus. Towards the end of his narrative we learn that he took an early opportunity to steal it back from the magus:

It had hung by my hair since I'd braided it there after the first fighting in the Sea of Olives. As soon as I'd seen the riders attacking, I'd moved my horse, never far away from the magus's, until I could cut the thong around his neck with the penknife I'd stolen the first or second day out of prison. He'd been too distracted to notice and had assumed later, as I'd known he would, that the thong had been sliced by a sword stroke and that the [stone] had dropped into the stream.[52]

Eugenides reveals the extent of his planning, from stealing a penknife early in the journey to calculating an opportunity to steal the stone back, and finally managing to keep the stone hidden and ensuring that the magus thought it was lost in the fight. Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson note that 'Eugenides's strategy is consistently to masquerade as a weaker and less able being than he actually is'.[53] In this instance, for example, he pretends to know nothing about sword fighting, although he is actually a skilled swordsman. Put together, these instances of deceptive behaviour reflect the qualities which Odysseus, Athena and Zeus display, and those characteristics which the ancient texts praise as 'ingenuity' and 'cunning arts'. However, it is the skill Eugenides displays as a storyteller which perhaps most likens him to Odysseus. He presents such a convincing false persona to the other characters within the narrative that they believe his disguise, even though they know about the real Queen's Thief – the magus declares, 'I think the current Thief is named Eugenides. Maybe you're related'.[54] His greatest skill in storytelling is through the narrative which we read, since he is able to fool the audience about his identity, actions and motivations, even more than Odysseus does.

52 Turner (1996) 260.

53 Morey/Nelson (2019) 228.

54 Turner (1996) 86.

THE GODS AND THE SUPERNATURAL

For the first half of the narrative, the gods feature only in the mythical stories which the characters tell each other in the evenings, and which provide the reader (and some of the characters) with important background about the purposes of their quest to find the stone. The gods start to enter the narrative more directly when Eugenides the Thief dreams briefly about Moira, the goddess of Fate and the gods' record keeper, each time he is about to enter the mysterious underwater temple to search for the legendary stone. On his third and final visit to this strange temple he encounters the gods in person, and from this point on the gods bring the supernatural out of mythological legends and into the narrative action.

The temple itself is a strange place, since it lies hidden under the river Aracthus for most of the year. Only in the summer, when the water in a reservoir upstream is too low does the river stop for four consecutive nights, revealing the ancient doors of the temple. The party have to wait until nightfall for the temple to be revealed, and Eugenides the narrator explains that the moment the river vanished 'was as if a giant tap somewhere had been turned off by the gods'.[55] This 'magical'[56] moment leads up to the supernatural state of the temple itself, since this is the place where Eugenides the Thief meets the gods. Eugenides spends his first two nights in the temple exploring the many corridors and false turnings of the maze, since he cannot find the treasure room, altar and *naos* (the main room in a Greek temple containing the cult statue) that he expects to see there. He locates a secret room with a staircase and climbs up until he reaches a room which appears to be filled with people, only they are absolutely silent and ignore him. At first Eugenides assumes that they are painted statues, noticing that 'their perfection made them unreal' as he walks among them.[57] This image draws on the fact that marble statues were painted in antiquity. However, he finds himself in the court of the gods rather than in a familiar temple constructed by mortals to praise the gods:

> There was no altar. There was a throne, and sitting on it was the statue of the Great Goddess Hephestia. She wore a robe cut from deep velvet, its reds darkest in the

55 Turner (1996) 154.

56 Turner (1996) 171.

57 Turner (1996) 185.

> heart of its folds and brighter along the edges [...] I watched the pattern of light on the velvet robe shift with the movement of breath.[58]

Hephestia's red clothing identifies her with her sacred volcano. However, the slight movement of the goddess's breathing that the narrator observes marks the shift in the narrative to the supernatural. Yet the divine world is set apart from Eugenides, since when he looks at Hephestia, she looks 'beyond' him, 'not unaware' of his presence, but 'unmoved by it'.[59] She holds a tray on which the stone lies, and while it is easy for him to reach and take it, she does not interact with him, either to prevent him from taking it, or to invite him to take it, emphasising the distance between divine and human.

Klöckner has observed that in architectural sculpture, figures of the gods 'are frequently separated from humans, for example through architectural elements, and they hardly ever take notice of' each other.[60] This distance or separation is evident in visual displays, but it is also explicit in literary narratives. The scene in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus meets Athena after he arrives on the Ithacan shore is unusual because goddess and mortal communicate openly and as equals, although at first they both disguise themselves and tell lies about their identities, each trying to outdo the other. Odysseus acknowledges that it is difficult even for a skilled mortal to recognise the goddess on meeting her.[61] More commonly, the gods occupy a different sphere to mortals in heroic epic, and they interfere with human actions without direct interaction. This distance, present in Greek art as well as literature, is evident in the way Eugenides the Thief encounters the gods, moving among them but not interacting with them directly. The only god who does speak to him is his namesake, the god Eugenides, who instructs him to take the stone from Hephestia's tray, although the narrator is unable to reply to the god. This god, the narrator reminds us, 'had once been mortal',[62] and this puts him closer to the human sphere.

Eugenides the god assures the Thief that the gods condone his actions and that he will not offend them if he takes the stone. Nonetheless the influence

58 Turner (1996) 186.

59 Turner (1996) 187.

60 Klöckner (2010) 107.

61 Hom. *Od.* 13, 312–3.

62 Turner (1996) 187.

and power of the gods permeates the Thief's adventures after he obtains the stone and for as long as he is in possession of it. In *The Thief,* the supernatural remains just beneath the surface since Eugenides the Thief cannot normally see the gods in the way that he can see and interact with other human characters. But he observes – and is very unnerved by – the effects of their power on him while he carries the stone. While Athena supports Odysseus during his adventures, the hero is unaware of her help at the time, since he is surrounded by strange supernatural characters and occurrences. By contrast, Eugenides expects to operate in a world where the supernatural remains firmly in legends and myths, rather than in the everyday. His concerns, as the Eddisian Queen's Thief, are to bring the stone to his own Queen while preventing the magus of Sounis from delivering it to his King, and simultaneously preventing his other companion Ambiades from betraying both Sounis and Eddis to Attolia. The magus asks Eugenides to steal fresh horses so that they can escape back to Sounis more quickly after the first fighting during which the magus believes he lost the stone (while Eugenides has actually stolen it). Eugenides worries that horses are noisy, making them difficult to steal, so he offers up his customary prayer to the gods to help him in his theft. Unexpectedly, as he leads the first of the five horses out of the stable, he notices that 'the iron shoes on [the horse's] hooves struck the flagstones soundlessly'.[63] He finds that he appears to be under a spell of total silence as nothing makes any noise at all – and he states that the 'silence of the horses had been immeasurably more unnerving than the gods in their temple'.[64] He realises that this means he is no longer operating within the everyday world where he can control and manipulate others by his cunning arts and 'cleverness' to achieve his political aims. Instead, he finds that he is under the gods' control, and the strange things that happen to him situate him in a mythological context in which he has limited power.

Eugenides observes that the silence with which the gods enshroud him allows the divine world to leak into the everyday, since 'the stables had been part of [his] world and the temple had not'.[65] This mixture frightens him, since he can no longer control events in the ways that he expects to in the everyday world. As a result, he discovers that he is 'eager to divest [himself] of the gods' atten-

63 Turner (1996) 211.

64 Turner (1996) 212.

65 Turner (1996) 212.

tion as quickly as possible',[66] in order to regain his autonomy in the political intrigue which he believes he has engineered. He acknowledges that there is a gap between mythology, religion and the gods, since the mythological stories about the gods and the religious rituals which honour the gods do not resemble the figures of the gods he sees, silent and motionless in their hidden temple. He admits that he did not expect that the gods 'might still be taking an interest' in him[67] after he stole the stone, and he feels uncomfortable in their spotlight. The contrast between the gods' disinterest in him when he walks among them and their attention on him as he acts in the mortal world is striking and indicates a shift in the narrative.

The supernatural elements of the story situate the narrative within the fantastic. This is a genre frequently rich in worldbuilding and fictional history, such as the appendices accompanying Tolkien's stories set in Middle-earth and Ursula Le Guin's *Tales from Earthsea,*[68] both of which develop the histories of their fantastical worlds. The supernatural elements in *The Thief* serve also to bring the mythological and magical out of the distant past and into the narrative present, as fits the genre of the fantastic. Although the fantastic is by no means limited to works targeted at younger readers, it is one of the elements which may attract a young adult readership. Eugenides needs to learn to operate within the divine as well as within the human and political environments, and in so doing, he must re-evaluate his understanding of the world. The presence of the supernatural in the everyday forces Eugenides to connect the divine and mortal worlds, and to understand the relationship between them. For the reader, the inclusion of the supernatural reinforces the idea that they are reading an adventure from the mythical past.

In the novel, it is the divine power of the stone that specifically enables Eugenides unwillingly to straddle the two worlds – the everyday and the divine – and this is particularly evident when he receives a fatal sword wound during a surprise attack by Attolian soldiers:

> I'd felt my life dragged out with the sword, but in the end my life wouldn't go. It had stretched between me and the sword. I think that only the power of the gods

66 Turner (1996) 212.

67 Turner (1996) 211.

68 Le Guin (2001).

> could have kept me alive, but my living was at the same time an offence to them. I should have died, but instead the pain went on and on.[69]

Possessing the stone bestows on him an immortality which prevents him from dying when he is mortally wounded. As he carries the stone while he is wounded, he straddles an uncomfortable boundary between the mortal and the divine, between the living and the dead. While he lies wounded and feverish in the Attolian stronghold, both Moira and the god Eugenides visit and talk to him, telling him that he will not die. Carrying the stone enables him to interact with these gods directly, although he remains in the everyday world as the stone gives him only a temporary power. While he carries the stone, he remains impossibly alive and strong enough that he manages to escape from the stronghold, walking up the mountains and back to Eddis. But the Thief of Eddis is not a god, and he carries the stone only until he can bring it to the Queen of Eddis – therefore the injury hurts, and after he hands the stone over to the Queen, he collapses unconscious. He recovers from his injuries, but his recovery process takes time and the gods are absent from his dreams since he is no longer in possession of the stone.

CONCLUSION

The world of *The Thief* feels very much like a part of the ancient Mediterranean world of the second and first millennia bce. However, this resemblance goes beyond the similarities of characters' names or the urban and religious structures we encounter. It permeates the characteristics which the societies of the Little Peninsula value, such as the skills of cleverness, ingenuity and cunning. This leads to the hereditary office of Queen's Thief in Eddis and the respect afforded to the holder of that position, even though the Thief must deceive people and steal from them. These qualities are mirrored in the stories of the gods, since – like their Greek counterparts – the gods also value cleverness and cunning over strength. The characters of the main narrative take part in complex plots which change the political relationships between the countries, but at the same time their actions and adventures resemble those of legendary heroes. The

69 Turner (1996) 225.

Thief Eugenides enters a mysterious temple which leads to the court of the gods, and he walks among the gods to take the legendary stone. While he carries the stone, his prayers to the gods are answered, so that a spell of divine silence enables him to steal provisions and horses. The stone protects him from death, enabling him to survive a mortal wound and recover enough strength to make a long journey on foot up the mountains to Eddis. Aspects of his adventures mirror those stories told about his divine namesake, the god Eugenides. While the narrator's heroic status is amplified by the gods' interest in him, he emphasises that it is the stone that prompts this interest. He complains that the stone makes him into the gods' 'instrument, used to change the shape of the world'.[70] In this sense, Eugenides has a different relationship with the gods than Odysseus, who is favoured and enhanced by Athena's patronage.

The gods remain shadowy supernatural forces in the narrative, visible in form or effect only to the Thief while he is in possession of the stone. The myths about the creation of the world connect Hephestia's divine pantheon to the mountains and rivers of Eddis. However, the Thief Eugenides senses a disjuncture between the myths and what he has seen of the gods, which leads him to 'doubt all of the stories'[71] he has heard about them. He muses:

> If the gods were incarnations of the mountains and rivers around us, or whether they drew their power from those sources, I couldn't say. They had greater power than any mortal.[72]

The gods belong to a supernatural level which lies beyond human understanding, and we learn that they governed the Thief's actions for longer than he initially realised. Just as Athena points out to Odysseus that she kept watch over him even though he did not know,[73] Eugenides discovers that 'the gods must have arranged'[74] the many coincidences which enabled him to complete his quest successfully. Ironically, this ensures the gods' direct involvement with the human sphere, since their supernatural intervention enables the political connections

70 Turner (1996) 278.

71 Turner (1996) 261.

72 Turner (1996) 261.

73 Hom. *Od.* 13, 299–301.

74 Turner (1996) 262.

between the countries of the Little Peninsula to develop. The supernatural power of the gods transforms the narrative from political adventure to mythical fantasy.

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Frances Foster
Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge,
184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ, UK
fjf20@cam.ac.uk

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