

Weeping Statues, Weeping Gods and Prodigies from Republican to Early-Christian Rome

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Abstract:

Among the numerous prodigies recorded in our sources from ancient Rome occur a few examples of the statue of a god shedding tears. The traditional apparatus for treating prodigies during the Republic viewed these occurrences as ruptures in the *pax deorum*, ruptures that signal an indeterminate problem in the relationship between human society and the gods. The sources that discuss these crying images assume that the statues are expressing grief over human mortality. Two phenomena related to this assumption will be considered: first, a literary tradition that maintains that gods are not subject to tears, and second, the critique of Augustine regarding weeping statues in pre-Christian Rome and the relationship between that judgement and the tears that Jesus Christ sheds in the gospels.

1. Introduction

Few religious epiphenomena divide believers from sceptics as sharply as visible evidence that a divinity has allegedly appeared to intervene in the day-to-day affairs of mortals. In our contemporary world, apparitions of the Virgin Mary, whether in her regularly scheduled appearances at Medjugorje or on a grilled-cheese sandwich in Florida, inevitably stir up strong reactions. Even among unbelievers, these visitations exert a fascination, as if kindling a longing to glimpse that Golden Age when gods and human beings freely intermingled on the earth. During the Roman Republic, these divine visitations find their most serious manifestation in the form of the state-recognized prodigy. Roman prodigies could take many unpredictable forms, ranging from morally questionable human behaviour (a rash of adultery in the city of Rome) to unlucky natural disasters (lightning striking a statue, flooding lakes) to an unexpected combination of naturally occurring elements (raining blood and stones, speaking cows).¹ The occurrence of prodigies such as these, and their official

1 Wülker (1903: 6–25) categorizes our extant examples. Rasmussen (2003: 53–

recognition by the state, signalled the possibility of an unspecific rupture of order, an order that is characterized in Latin by the phrase *pax deorum*. This phrase, translated literally as “peace of the gods”, describes the proper functioning of the natural world and its inhabitants. Prodigies, which rarely either refer to any specific past faults or are predictive of a definite punishment in the future, provided the Roman political system with opportunities to appease relationships with the divine through publicly performed sacrifices, festivals and other manifestations of ritual.

Direct intervention of the divine in Roman society manifests itself especially dramatically in how the images made to honour the deities react to the world around them. Ancient written sources preserve over a dozen prodigies that record the carved representation of a divinity exhibiting unusual behaviour. In 52 B.C., the turbulent year of Pompey’s sole consulship, one image broke into a sweat for three consecutive days while in 42 B.C. a statue of Jupiter exuded blood from thumb and shoulder in apparent anticipation of the violent civil wars that would occupy the next decade.² The topic of this essay treats the most human form of this manifestation of divine displeasure, the weeping of a god’s statue at a moment of apparent crisis. The tears of a god occupy a small but telling chapter in the history of the Roman state religion and of its eventual confrontation with early Christian apologists.

2. The Theology of the Weeping Statue

Most officially recognized prodigies can be classified as exhibiting some sort of violation of boundaries: animals leaving the wilds to enter the city of Rome, hermaphrodites crossing the established lines of biological sex, or lightning striking an object of political significance such as a statue or temple.³ While any attempts to schematize such a disparate amount of material must tend towards oversimplification, this model that sees prod-

116) provides a full listing in chronological order. All translations offered below from Greek and Latin sources are my own.

- 2 See Dio 40.47.2 and Julius Obsequens 70. Wülker (1903: 13–14) offers lists of statues exuding blood and sweat, with much additional commentary in Pease (1920–23: 271–272). For early and medieval Christian sculptures equipped with waterworks to give the illusion of bleeding and weeping, see Demangel (1938) and Poulsen (1945: 192–193), who also cites examples of such illusionistic devices from antiquity.
- 3 See Rosenberger (1998: 107–126), borrowing the notion of liminality from Douglas (1966).

igies as violators of liminality provides a helpful lens through which to view weeping statues. The production of tears by a statue can in fact be characterized as transgression of the boundaries between the human and the divine. Gods, normally, have no reason to cry. Or do they?

In *The City of God*, Augustine presents a detailed critique of the tears produced by the statue of Apollo at Cumae during the second century B.C. (*De civ.* 3.11). Those tears, he maintains, provide clear evidence for the impotence of this and other pagan demons, since weeping demonstrates visibly that it lies outside the abilities of Apollo to guarantee either lasting peace or victory in war for his human worshippers. In this and other instances that Augustine cites from throughout Roman literature and history, the tears of these alleged gods mourn the suffering of their mortal followers, a suffering that they are helpless to prevent. This impotence contrasts with Augustine's Christian god, whose power extends to all earthly affairs (*verum illum atque omnipotentem summum Deum curare ... ista terrena*). Augustine's reasoned disquisition on weeping statues and lamenting demons accords with his overall project in *The City of God*, to show that the recent sack of Rome in 410 A.D. did not arise because the city had abandoned worship of its traditional gods. As he demonstrates with this example and numerous others, the gods of Rome are deceptive demons, powerless by contrast with the single Christian God.

A modern reader may register surprise at an apparent omission in Augustine's account. Nowhere does he doubt the fact that a pagan demon had the power to occupy Apollo's statue in order to produce his tears. Rather, he seems not to question the belief common throughout Greek and Roman antiquity that a divine spirit can come to occupy an image that mortals have made to represent it.⁴ The spirit of the divine becomes immanent in its physical, manufactured representation. In the city of Rome, Macrobius tells us that, when not celebrating the festival of the Saturnalia, the Romans bound in woolen shackles the cult representation of the god Saturn. Macrobius' actual words are telling: "Saturn himself" is put in chains (*Saturnus ipse in compedibus*).⁵ Following a mode of expression common to Greek and Roman ritual, god and icon become interchangeable in Macrobius' text, as the proper name *Saturnus* can be em-

4 See Gordon (1979), Curran (1994: 52–53) on early Christians and Steiner (2001: 79–134, esp. 105–134).

5 Macrobius, *Sat.* 1.8.5, with the Roman parallels and Greek precedents cited in Wissowa (²1912: 205).

ployed for either (see Gordon 1979: 7–8). Seneca offers a particularly vivid demonstration of this presumed immanence of the divine in a manufactured artifact. He describes a form of reverent behaviour that takes place regularly throughout the year by those paying respect to the Capitoline triad at Rome, a species of reverence that strikes the modern reader as peculiar: the cult statues are bathed and perfumed; Jupiter is informed of the time at regular intervals; women imaginatively adjust the hairstyles of Juno and Minerva; men seek advice from the deities about impending lawsuits.⁶ In a world such as this, in which the gods are readily available for consultation through their images and in which images represent the actual bodily presence of the gods, the tears of a cult statue provide a rare voice to the other side of this dialogue between divine and human. As a result, I would suggest that the aberration involved in the prodigy of the weeping statue, the boundary that is crossed and so threatens the *pax deorum*, resides not simply in the animation of that statue. On the contrary: the sources make clear that the immanence of the divinity in the statue is a general assumption of the worshipper. Rather, I would like to follow Augustine in finding the oddity of tears in the fact that it is not the statue but the god who has chosen to cry. Weeping, after all, both in antiquity and the present, is normally understood as an activity unique to human beings.⁷

3. The Prodigy Process at Rome

In the following discussion I shall not be considering the plentiful material from Latin poetry (particularly epic) that describes weeping statues acting as warnings of impending disasters to specific individuals.⁸ Nor shall I be concerned with the ancient rationalizations that one sometimes encounters in ancient texts, such as Cicero's explanation that the alleged sweat from statues simply results from the condensation of moisture on the material from which the image has been carved (*De div.* 2.58). Rather, I shall consider only those phenomena attested in Roman historical texts, and interpreted by the Roman senate, as having direct relevance to the

6 Seneca ap. Augustine, *De civ.* 6.10; see further Corbeill (2004: 26–33).

7 Kappas (2009, in this volume) provides an up-to-date survey of scientific explanations for why weeping is restricted to human beings. For ancient authors on weeping animals, see Fögen (2009: 3 n. 7, in this volume).

8 For a representative list see Bömer (1986: 466) on Ovid, *Met.* 15.792.

state's well-being. For a prodigy to be recognized in the Roman Republic required a complex series of checks and rechecks that guaranteed that only the most telling prodigies would receive full attention from the state apparatus. It will be helpful, therefore, to outline briefly this prodigy process.⁹

When a possible prodigy is observed during the Republican period, the witness or witnesses report its occurrence to a magistrate. If the magistrate judges the incident to have potential significance, a report is brought before the senate in Rome for consideration. The role of the senate cannot be underestimated; in fact, a passage from Livy indicates that the expiation of prodigies was sometimes, if not always, first on the senate's agenda, preceding even pressing issues of war (Livy 24.11.1). Should the senate deem the reported event unimportant or inauthentic, the incident is forgotten. If, however, the senators accept the occurrence as a possible prodigy, their own report is forwarded to one of three religious bodies for an expert opinion – the *pontifices*, the *decemviri* (later *quindecimviri*) *sacris faciundis* or the *haruspices*. The priestly body chosen then submits a report back to the senate concerning the meaning of the prodigy and recommends a method by which it should be expiated. The senate has the final say on whether and to what extent it should accept these recommendations, and it may even choose, after all these steps have been taken, to ignore the event altogether. In considering the prodigy of the weeping statue, therefore, it is ultimately the senate that decides on both the validity of the event and the proper interpretation of the tears. The weeping statue of Roman republican politics, unlike the anonymous prodigies and portents that one finds in Latin literature, is subject to the investigation and sanction of the highest governing body in the state.

4. The Sources

The extant sources record three (perhaps four) occasions when the weeping of a cult statue prompted a formal inquiry from the senate. Each instance takes place during the second century B.C. and outside the city of Rome. In two cases, the *decemviri* were the priestly body consulted, while in the third certain instance the senate had recourse to the Etruscan *haruspices*. Here as elsewhere the sources do not allow us to discern what

9 The following account derives from Wissowa (²1912: 391–396) and Rosenberger (1998: 17–90).

precise principles determined the senate's choice of which priestly body to consult on any given occasion.¹⁰

The earliest extant example dates to 181 B.C. Livy constitutes the principal source. Among several prodigies from both within and outside Rome, the *pontifices* announced that the statue of Juno Sospita at Lanuvium had wept (Livy 40.19.2: *pontifices ... nuntiavere ... Lanuvi simulacrum Iunonis Sospitae lacrimasse*).¹¹ This did not mark the first portent produced by this image; Livy also records that during the Second Punic War the same statue had shed blood (23.31.15). This site of Juno's worship at Lanuvium, in fact, appears on the prodigy lists at least seven times, more than any other single cult.¹² In the case of the weeping statue of 181 B.C., the senate ordered that the consuls make public sacrifice with full-grown animals (*hostiis maioribus*) and that the *decemviri* consult the Sibylline books for all prodigies of that year. As a result of the consultation, the senate declared for Rome that a *supplicatio* be held before the statues of all the gods (*circa omnia pulvinaria*), and that a three-day *supplicatio* and festival be celebrated across the whole of Italy.

The next recorded instance, also preserved in Livy, dates to 169 B.C. As with the example in 181 B.C., the episode takes place south of Rome, this time at the temple of Apollo in Cumae. Livy's account is concise: "on the citadel at Cumae Apollo wept for three days and three nights" (43.13.4: *Cumis in arce Apollo triduum ac tres noctes lacrimavit*). For this and several other public prodigies witnessed in this year the senate once more recommends that the *decemviri* consult the sacred books, and several elements recommended for expiation resemble those for 181 B.C.: that a *supplicatio* occur and that the consuls sacrifice with adult animals (*victimis maioribus*) in the presence of statues of all the gods (*circa omnia pulvinaria*).

The third and final occurrence of a weeping statue receives special attention in our extant texts, and provides rare details concerning the criteria that the senate will have considered in deciding on the interpretation of this particular type of prodigy.¹³ The event is preserved in three sepa-

10 For possible specialties of these priestly bodies, see Rasmussen (2003: 180–182).

11 Cf. Julius Obsequens 6. Luterbacher's conjecture *Lanuvini* for *lanuvi* of the tradition has no bearing on my discussion here.

12 See MacBain (1982: 12–13 n. 16). Lanuvium itself is associated with a total of fifteen prodigies.

13 I assume that when Augustine (*De civ.* 3.11) mentions a fourth instance during the war against Antiochus (190 B.C.), he is in fact referring to the phenomenon

rate texts, each of which seems ultimately to derive from Livy, whose text no longer survives for this period. The sources have, however, chosen to stress different details. Julius Obsequens, normally a reliable reporter of his Livian source, gives the following concise account from the year 130 B.C. (Julius Obsequens 28):

Apollinis simulacrum lacrimavit per quadriduum. vates portenderunt Graeciae fore exitium, unde deductum esset. sacrificatum tum a Romanis donaque in templo posita.

A statue of Apollo wept for four days. Prophets (*vates*) predicted the destruction of Greece, since this was the source of the statue. Subsequently, the Romans made sacrifices and deposited gifts in the temple.

In contrast with the previous two examples, in which the tears of the statue are implied simply to signal a general rupture of the *pax deorum* that needed to be remedied with appropriate ritual activity, this weeping Apollo is given a specific interpretation. Apollo's tears portend the downfall of Greece. It is rare for an official prodigy from the Republic to contain such a clearly predictive element.¹⁴ In the excerpt from the third-century historian Dio describing this same event, no mention is made of the conquest of Greece.¹⁵ The two accounts in fact at first appear to be irreconcilable with one another. Dio, in his account of the year 129, interprets in retrospect the tears of Apollo (together with a recent shower of stones) as portending the death of Scipio Aemilianus and the consequent rise in power of the followers of the assassinated Tiberius Gracchus. In this consideration of domestic politics Dio makes no mention of any misfortune that may befall Greece. He does, however, add a surprising detail. In parallel with the official treatment of hermaphrodite prodigies, the Romans decide in response to the advice of the soothsayers (ἐκ συμβουλῆς μάντεων) to cut down the statue and throw it in the sea.¹⁶ At this point, Dio's fragmentary text breaks off.

of 181 B.C. (Livy 40.19.2); cf. in the same passage his dating of the prodigy of 130 to the time of the Achaean war, which ended in 146.

- 14 North (1990: 60) provides cases in which prophecy is an element – although not an essential one – of the interpretation of prodigies and of Roman divination more generally.
- 15 Dio's emphatic wording may imply that he is offering his own interpretation, in conscious opposition to the one predicting the destruction of Greece (Cassius Dio 24 fr. 84.2): καί μοι ἐς τοῦτο ὅτι μάλιστα ἀποσκήψαι δοκεῖ (...).
- 16 In light of Augustine, *De civ.* 3.11, I assume that κατακόψαι means “cut down” rather than “hew ... in pieces” (Cary 1914: 429). Preserving the statue unharmed would also parallel the expiation of hermaphrodites, who are well-treated before being sent adrift.

The apparent discrepancy between the accounts of Obsequens and Dio can be reconciled by the passage of Augustine referred to above, who reveals that this prodigy of weeping Apollo took place at Cumae and resulted in the separate consultation of two distinct groups of *haruspices* (*De civ.* 3.11). When the prodigy was first announced, Augustine relates that the *haruspices* (the *μάντεις* of Dio) were so terrified by the portentous event that they advised tossing the statue into the sea. At this point, some old men of Cumae (*Cumani senes*) intervened, presumably before the senate in Rome had come to a final decision regarding how this prodigy should be expiated. The Cumaeans, pointing to the similar prodigy from 181 (Livy 43.13.4, cited above), noted that in this earlier instance the tears of Apollo turned out favourably for the Romans and that, as a result, gifts had been sent in gratitude to Cumae in accordance with a senatorial decree. In response to this argument from precedent by the Cumaeans, the senate chose to take the extraordinary step of ordering a second consultation of the same priestly body, but one which constituted, in Augustine's words, a group of "more experienced *haruspices*" (*peritiores ... haruspices*).¹⁷ This second set of *haruspices* corresponds with the *vates* in the version of Obsequens, who perhaps repeats the word that he had found in his Livian source.¹⁸ These new priests concurred with the Cumaean elders that the tears of Apollo in fact bode well for the Roman state: since Cumae was originally a Greek colony, the god was expressing grief for his homeland of Greece, whose gradual fall under Roman sway would continue in the following year with the capture and execution of Eumenes III.

This final example makes explicit what the others seem to assume, namely that the tears of the statue are meant to reflect the sadness of the god who occupies it, as it weeps over the deaths that will soon be inflicted upon mortals. This is precisely the reason that Augustine has chosen to refer to the phenomenon in *The City of God*, as he maintains that if these gods of the early Romans had any power at all, they should have been able to remedy the situation for their worshippers rather than weep mournfully. I would like to close this discussion of tearful deities

17 Examples exist of the senate consulting two sets of priests simultaneously (MacBain 1982: 58–59, with lists at 82–106), but I know of no other example of consecutive consultations.

18 For Livy's use of *vates* to refer to *haruspices* (restricted in the extant portions of his text to the first decade), see Livy 1.56.5, 2.42.10 (with Ogilvie 1970: 349) and Hano (1986: 108–109).

by speculating about pre-Christian origins for Augustine's claim, and about the ways in which this same claim may have affected how early Christian apologists rationalize divine weeping.

5. Real Gods Don't Cry

A tradition that it is contrary to a god's nature to weep from sadness occasionally surfaces in Roman poetry. Ovid registers the reaction of Apollo upon learning that his lover Coronis, whom he had just killed out of jealousy, was pregnant with his child (Ovid, *Met.* 2.621–623):

*tum vero gemitus (neque enim caelestia tingi
ora licet lacrimis) alto de corde petitos
edidit.*

But then Apollo emitted groans from deep in his heart (since it is inappropriate for heavenly faces to become wet with tears).

Ovid plays elsewhere with this alleged prohibition against gods crying. In his *Fasti*, when the goddess Ceres, disguised as a mortal woman, explains to her human hosts that her daughter has been kidnapped, the poet self-consciously remarks on her display of grief: “a shining drop falls on her warm breast like tears”, adding parenthetically that the drop could not in fact be a tear “since it is not characteristic of gods to weep”.¹⁹ Although exceptions to this claim occur both elsewhere in Ovid and in other poets, the notion that tears are forbidden to the gods resurfaces throughout Greek and Roman literature.²⁰ The prohibition can even be imagined as carrying over into the life of the poet himself. Consider the opening words of the epitaph of the epic poet Naevius, which hints at a possible rationalization of this prohibition (ap. Aulus Gellius, *Noct. Att.* 1.24.2):

*immortales mortales si foret fas flere,
flerent divae Camenae Naevium poetam.*

If it were permitted for the immortals to weep for mortals,
the divine Muses would weep for the poet Naevius.

19 Ovid, *Fast.* 4.521: *ut lacrimae (neque enim lacrimare deorum est) / decidit in tepidos lucida gutta sinus.*

20 See Bömer (1969: 388) on *Met.* 2.621–622 and, especially, Bernbeck (1967: 9 with n. 19): “Im allgemeinen herrscht die Anschauung, daß Götter nicht weinen”. Bernbeck's further claim that Vergil avoids weeping gods in his epic is, as Julia Dyson Hejduk has kindly reminded me, demonstrably false.

The juxtaposition *immortales mortales* points up the fundamental distinction between gods and human beings – their relationship with death –, while the contrafactual construction of the entire couplet reinforces the impossibility that gods should shed tears, even for one of their dearest followers. The emphasis on the mortality of the human body that we see in this epitaph informs some of the earliest Christian writings on weeping from grief. We have already noted how Augustine critiques the tears of the statue of Apollo for its powerlessness in the face of human mishap; the god’s tearful sympathy for his worshippers on earth betrays his inability to rescue them from future suffering. Two centuries earlier Tertullian, in another contrast with pagan traditions, includes in his critique of Homer’s disrespectful treatment of the gods the fact that the epic poet describes Zeus shedding tears for the dead Sarpedon in the *Iliad* (Tertullian, *Ad nat.* 1.10.39). The imagined source of Zeus’ tears, as well as other divine tears discussed by the Christian apologists, parallels examples from earlier Roman literature. It is an awareness of the tragedy of mortality that causes the god to weep in each instance. I would like to close, therefore, by outlining a seemingly unrelated case of weeping over human mortality that had significant doctrinal consequences for the early Christians and that will provide further perspective on their resistance to weeping statues.

The most well-known example of tears in the New Testament describes the weeping of Christ at the tomb of the dead Lazarus: “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). It is in the exegesis of a weeping Christ that early commentators expatiate most clearly on the relationship between tears and divinity. They deny the shedding of tears to Jesus’ divine aspect, instead consistently including his grief as proof of the mortally incarnate aspect of the son of God. Augustine, for example, remarks that Jesus was indeed part human “because as he was about to raise Lazarus he even poured forth tears”, this and other displays of emotion being peculiar to human life on earth, and not a feature of life everlasting.²¹ Similar explanations are offered for the other recorded instance of Jesus shedding tears, namely when he was contemplating the future destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). As early as the second century, Origen’s commentary on this passage furnishes additional theological justification for the doc-

21 Augustine, *De civ.* 14.9: *proinde, quod fatendum est, etiam cum rectas et secundum Deum habemus has affectiones, huius vitae sunt, non illius quam futuram speramus.* Cf. Tertullian, *Carn.* 9 and other examples gathered in Elowsky (2007: 20–21).

trine that Jesus appeared among human beings in the weakness of mortal flesh. His incarnate nature, Origen argues, allowed him to confirm the truth of each of the beatitudes: the truth of “Blessed are they who suffer persecution on account of justice”, for example, was reflected in his own Passion and crucifixion. The human display of Jesus’ tears found in the gospels, by an analogous argument, allows the physical action of Christ to support the claim of “Blessed are those who weep” (St. Jerome, *Hom. Orig. in Luc.* 38, p. 216.12). In the mid-fourth century, Hilary of Poitiers explains these displays of grief as representing a fault that arises from the sadness of the physical body; grief is not a possibility for either God the father or the Holy Spirit, since they lack human form and substance, but only for the incarnate son (Hilary of Poitiers, *Trin.* 10.55–56). The fifth-century bishop Nicetas of Remesiana makes clear the supposition upon which each of these theological arguments rests: “tears are the product of a true body” (Nicetas, *Fid. 6: lacrimae enim veri corporis sunt humores*). There remains no room in these arguments for tears of the divine, or for the weeping statues that they inhabit.

The early Christian writers surveyed briefly above would clearly concur in Augustine’s argument for why the demons worshipped by the pagans must be impotent. Evidence for his case includes those occasions when they weep through their manufactured images. The early Christian apologists, in their attempts to come to terms with the tears of their own divinity, Jesus Christ, identify the apparent weakness of his body as an exception that only reaffirms the importance of Jesus’ incarnation in the world.

6. Conclusion

It is difficult to read about weeping statues in early Rome, and the corresponding Christian exegeses on divine tears, without thinking of the prevalence of the phenomenon in the modern Roman Catholic church. The resemblance is more than superficial. A book-length study of divine visitations of the Virgin Mary in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reaches a conclusion that, *mutatis mutandis*, provides an apt description of the Roman attitude toward prodigies, of the evidence that prodigies signal a disruption in the *pax deorum*, and of the state-ordered expiation that follows: “the major purpose of the Virgin’s latter-day appearances is to give the world a last opportunity to restore the disrupted sacred order and the divine-human relationship which this order represents – through

repentance or conversion, a return to appropriate devotional practices, and submission to the ordinances of the Church” (Zimdars-Swartz 1991: 249). The significance of contemporary divine visitations finds a clear echo in its pre-Christian roots.

I have not speculated on what circumstances may have compelled the Roman senate to accept as examples of divine communication the three certain instances of weeping statues discussed above. I do not, however, believe that their acceptance should be attributed either to complete credulity or to political machinations whose details the extant sources do not allow us to reconstruct. The best ancient testimony that I know of that allows us to glimpse the possible reasoning of these senators can be found in a remark of Plutarch in his *Life of Coriolanus*. The story of a statue speaking in gratitude to its dedicatees after its erection in a temple prompts the following reflection (Plutarch, *Cor.* 38.1–4):

ἰδίοντα μὲν γὰρ ἀγάλματα φανῆναι καὶ δακρυρροοῦντα καὶ τινὰς μεθιέντα νοτίδας αἱματώδεις οὐκ ἀδύνατόν ἐστι· καὶ γὰρ ξύλα καὶ λίθοι πολλάκις μὲν εὐρώτα συνάγουσι γόνιμον ὑγρότητος, πολλὰς δὲ καὶ χροὰς ἀνιάσιν ἐξ αὐτῶν, καὶ δέχονται βαφὰς ἐκ τοῦ περιέχοντος (...). οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ τοῖς ὑπ’ εὐνοίας καὶ φιλίας πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἄγαν ἐμπαθῶς ἔχουσι, καὶ μηδὲν ἀθετεῖν μηδ’ ἀναίνεσθαι τῶν τοιοῦτων δυναμένοις, μέγα πρὸς πίστιν ἐστὶ τὸ θαυμάσιον καὶ μὴ καθ’ ἡμᾶς τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ δυνάμεως. οὐδενὶ γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἀνθρωπίνῳ προσέοικεν οὔτε φύσιν οὔτε κίνησιν οὔτε τέχνην οὔτ’ ἰσχύν, οὐδ’ εἴ τι ποιῆ τῶν ἡμῖν ἀποιήτων καὶ μηχανᾶται τῶν ἀμηχάνων, παράλογόν ἐστιν, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἐν πᾶσι διαφέρων πολὺ, μάλιστα τοῖς ἔργοις ἀνόμοιός ἐστι καὶ παρηλαγμένος.

It is not impossible for statues to appear to sweat, weep and emit a type of moisture resembling blood. For both wood and stone often attract mold that produces dampness, creating many colours and building up layers from the atmosphere. (...) But for those who are sympathetically disposed and affectionate for their god, and also are unable to reject or renounce things of this sort, their faith is supported by the marvellous and by the transcendent character of the divine power. For the divine in no way resembles the human in either its nature, movement, skill or strength. And it defies logic if it achieves the impossible, doing something that we are unable to do. Rather, differing from us in every way, the divine power is the most dissimilar and distant from us in the actions that it performs.²²

The mixture that Plutarch displays of empirical rationalism and the piety of doubt well characterizes ancient Roman attitudes towards the divine in general. If nature presents you with something seemingly unnatural, it is

22 Compare the similar remarks at Plutarch, *Cam.* 6. I have made free use of Perrin (1916: 213–215) in my translation.

best welcomed as another reminder of human ignorance when confronted with the divine. Rather than offering a logical conundrum, the blood, sweat and tears of the gods is understood to reveal the capacity of the natural world to communicate intelligibly with its human inhabitants.

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