

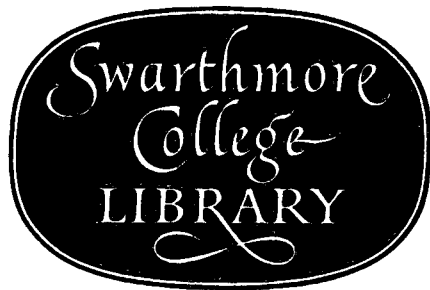
EURIPIDES



BACCHAE

with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary by

Richard Seaford



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Bacchae

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THE PLAYS OF EURIPIDES
BACCHAE

General Editor
Professor Christopher Collard

EURIPIDES

Bacchae

with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary by

Richard Seaford

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INTRODUCTION TO BACCHAE

§I. TRADITION AND STRUCTURE

'For the Didascalai report that after Euripides' death his son of the same name produced the *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, *Alkmeon*, and *Bacchae* at the City Dionysia' (in Athens).¹ Presumably then *Bacchae* was one of the very last plays written by Euripides, perhaps after his departure from Athens to the court of King Archelaos in Macedonia, where, according to ancient tradition, he died (in 407-6 BC).² Exactly when it was posthumously produced we do not know.

The play shows us Dionysos' arrival, disguised as a mortal and accompanied by a thiasos (sacred band) of Lydian women, to establish his rites at Thebes, where Kadmos' daughter Semele had died giving birth to him, blasted by the thunderbolt of his father Zeus. He has driven all the women of Thebes in a frenzy from their homes to Mt. Kithairon to worship him there with dance and song. The young king Pentheus resists the new cult, and can be dissuaded from this resistance neither by his grandfather Kadmos and Teiresias, who are joining the worship of the new god, nor by Dionysos himself, nor by the escape of the imprisoned Dionysos amid the miraculous collapse of the royal house, nor by a herdsman's description of the miraculous powers of the maenads on Kithairon. But Dionysos does persuade him to go, disguised as a maenad, to spy on the maenads on the mountainside. There he is revealed by Dionysos to the maenads, who tear him apart, with his mother Agave playing the leading role. She returns triumphantly to the royal house holding Pentheus' head, which she thinks is an animal's, and is brought out of her delusion by her father Kadmos, who has gathered from the mountainside the rest of Pentheus' dismembered body. Dionysos appears as a god, and announces the establishment of his rites at Thebes (1329-30n.) and the exile of Kadmos and his wife and daughters.

This is a drama of divine punishment, like e.g. the *Hippolytus*.³ The story

¹ Schol.Ar.Frogs 67; the *Didascalai* were theatrical records edited by Aristotle.

² The frequency of resolutions in the iambic trimeters of *Bacchae* confirms its lateness in Eur.'s career; see most recently M.Cropp and G.Fick, *Resolutions and Chronology in Euripides*, *BICS Suppl* 43 (1985). The Testimonia for the life of Eur. are collected and translated by D.Kovacs, *Euripidea* (1994).

³ For a discussion of such dramas see Burnett.

combines various patterns typical of Greek myth. Gods make visits in disguise, and this may result in the foundation of cult, as e.g. in the myths of Demeter visiting Eleusis or of Zeus and Hermes visiting the household of Philemon and Baucis.⁴ Typical also is the theme of the male offspring of a royal family (Dionysos) who returns to his birthplace and establishes himself there, sometimes with violence (Oedipus, Jason, Perseus, Theseus, etc). Again, there is a type of aetiological myth in which human transgression is, as in *Bacchae*, punished by disaster that ends with the foundation of cult.⁵ More specifically, in a set of myths about Dionysos he is resisted by the king or by women of the king's family⁶ (in *Ba.* by both⁷), a resistance inevitably broken by punishment which sometimes consists of the frenzied killing (or even eating) of kin.⁸

The resistance of Lykourgos and of Pentheus had been dramatised in earlier tragedies,⁹ from which very little survives. We know most about Aeschylus' dramatisation of the resistance of Lykourgos, the few fragments of which (57-67) can be cautiously supplemented by the fragments of the Roman Naevius' tragedy *Lycurgus*, which seems to have been modelled on Aeschylus.¹⁰ Aeschylus' treatment exhibits several similarities with *Bacchae*, in particular the capture and interrogation of Dionysos, with contempt for his effeminate appearance,¹¹ the imprisonment and miraculous escape of the maenads (443-8n.), and the shaking of the house as if it were in a bacchic frenzy.¹² Other

⁴ Most notably narrated in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Ovid *Metamorphoses* 8.624-724. Note also *Od.*17.485-7, and the list compiled by Burnett 24 n.8.

⁵ E.g. in foundation myths of the cults of Artemis in Sparta and at Brauron in Attica. See §IV.

⁶ Lykourgos in Thrace, Pentheus, the three daughters of Minyas at Orchomenos, the three daughters of Proitos at Argos. The numerous myths of resistance to D. and his cult are listed by P. McGinty in *Harv. Theol. Rev.* 71 (1978) 77-8 (only Perseus escapes punishment).

⁷ At *Ba.*26-31 the three daughters of king Kadmos reject the story of D.'s divine birth after the death of his mother, their sister Semele.

⁸ Lykourgos (Aesch.*Lykourgeia*; etc.: Sutton); Minyads (Anton.Lib.10; etc.); Argive women (Apollod.2.2.2); etc.: Seaford (1994a) 253-6, 291, 340, 348, 353, 357.

⁹ Thespis *Pentheus* (?); Polyphrasmon's trilogy on Lykourgos; Aeschylus' tetralogy *Edonians*, *Bassarai*, *Neaniskoi*, *Lykourgos*, and his titles *Semele* or *Hydrophoroi*, *Xantriai*, *Bakchai*, *Pentheus*, *Trophoi*, which have been variously arranged into a tetralogy on the Pentheus story; Sophokles *Bakchai* (?), *Hydrophoroi* (?); Xenokles *Bakchai*, Iophon *Bakchai* or *Pentheus*; Spintharos *Semele Keraounumene*; Kleophon *Bakchai* (5th.cent.?).

¹⁰ Dodds (1960) xxx-xxxiii.

¹¹ Aesch.*Edonians* fr.61, cf. 59, 60, 62; *Ba.*353n., 453-508; Naevius *fr.*43, 44, 48, 50-1.

¹² 576-641n.(b); Aesch.*Edonians* fr.58; Naevius *fr.*52-4.

similarities between *Bacchae* and the fragments of Aeschylus (or Naevius' *Lycurgus*) are mentioned in the Commentary on 100 (D. as bull), 118 (maenads working wool), 221-5 (maenads called loose women), 576-641 (the thiasos imitating thunder and lightning, man-bull identification, etc.), 606-9 (epiphany), 661-2 and 678-9 (sun melting snow), 748 (maenads as birds), 833 (maenadic garment ποδήρης, reaching to the feet), 912-76 (maenadic dress funerary), 918-9 (Dionysos' mirror), 977 (Lyssa), 1020-3 (maenads as hunters).

Further evidence for other versions is provided by vase-paintings of the myth.¹³ Several of these roughly contemporary with *Bacchae* show the maenads attacking Pentheus, who is *armed* (and never disguised as a maenad). This has been taken, together with the many hints of imminent armed action in *Bacchae* (50-2n.) and with Aesch.*Eum.*25-6 ('the god was general to (ἐστρατήγησεν) bakchai, contriving for Pentheus a fate like that of a hare'), to indicate an earlier tragic version in which Pentheus went out undisguised and with arms to attack the maenads.¹⁴ This may well be so, but it is illegitimate to infer therefrom that Euripides invented the transvestism of Pentheus, just as it is illegitimate to infer from the fact that in the vase-paintings the killer of Pentheus is never named Agaue (and once Galene¹⁵) that Euripides was the first to have Pentheus killed by his mother.¹⁶

Given the paucity of our evidence for Dionysos in tragedy (apart from *Bacchae*), it is striking how many themes in *Bacchae* can be identified as probably traditional.¹⁷ Tragedy originated in the cult of Dionysos, and the very earliest themes were, it seems, Dionysiac,¹⁸ probably with the god playing the

¹³ See Philippart; March; *LIMC* s. Pentheus. Most depictions of the myth are of the death of Pentheus.

¹⁴ most recently by March (cf. 50-2n.).

¹⁵ *ARV*² 16.14 = *LIMC* s. Pentheus n.39, of about 520 BC.

¹⁶ Against March on this latter point see Seaford in Faraone and Carpenter 123 n.38. See also Dodds (1960) xxxiii-xxxv. Even if (and it is not impossible) Eur. did make these innovations, both kin-killing (see below) and transvestism (912-76n.) were traditional Dionysiac themes. In general modern critics tend to assume that the first appearance of a theme is the same as innovation, even though what survives may always represent no more than a tiny portion of the versions that once existed (written, visual, oral).

¹⁷ Versnel (189-205) rightly points to various respects in which Dionysos in *Bacchae* is especially like a *Hellenistic* deity (notably: claim to universal worship, deity proved by miracles, 'henotheism', personal submission to deity, futile resistance to deity). But I suspect that, had we a Dionysiac myth in detail earlier than *Bacchae*, we would see that these respects were not Euripidean innovations.

¹⁸ Seaford (1994a) 268, 272 n.165, 276.

central role (as in *Bacchae* but in no other extant tragedy). I have argued elsewhere that the importance of the divinely-inspired self-destruction of the royal family in tragedy derived in part from the centrality of this theme to Dionysiac myth.¹⁹ And so *Bacchae*, although one of the very latest of extant tragedies, may nevertheless be, as the only extant tragedy about Dionysos, in a sense the closest to the beginnings of the genre.²⁰ It is also possible that the drama's archaic (and to some extent Aeschylean) language and style²¹ came as naturally associated with the archaic theme.

Moreover the *structure* of *Bacchae* is for Euripides unusually coherent. Indeed, the action of the play seems especially suited to tragic form, and even to the physical form of the theatre. When at the end of the prologue Dionysos tells his thiasos (the chorus) to beat their drums 'around this royal house so that the polis may see' (60-1), this relates the central conflict of the drama, between Dionysiac cult and the royal power, to the physical arrangement which so perfectly expresses it: the (Athenian) polis is watching a dancing circle (the *orchestra*) in which a thiasos perform their Dionysiac dance and song in front of the royal house that will be visited by two epiphanies of their god, in the first of which he will destroy it physically, in the second appear above it to order the exile of its surviving members. The chorus are, as embodying the threatened cult, unusually central to the action, while retaining the typical choral function of providing moral and emotional comment on it. Even the characteristically Euripidean lyric idyll tends in *Bacchae* to avoid centrifugality - by embodying either a desire to escape the persecution (402-15, 862-76) or speculation on the whereabouts of the longed-for god. Another typical feature of tragedy that seems especially at home in *Bacchae* is the polarity between the action on stage and the (sometimes violent) events reported from elsewhere by a messenger: in *Bacchae* this polarity is (unusually) important throughout the play, and makes special sense as expressing the (politically significant) power of Dionysiac cult to unite the town with its periphery.²² The leaders of the thiasos on the mountainside have gone there from the house in the theatre, as do Kadmos and Teiresias, and the thiasos in the theatre sing of going to the mountainside (135-

¹⁹ Seaford (1994a) chs.7-9.

²⁰ In particular, the dithyrambic *parodos* may reproduce a stage in the development of tragedy from the dithyramb: 64-169n.

²¹ described by Dodds (1960) xxxvi-xxxviii. Note also the remarks of Aristotle on the earliest type of *parodos* (64-169n.) and on trochaic tetrameters (576-641(n.) end).

²² Seaford (1994a) 235-51.

66). The two humiliations of Pentheus at home (575-659, 912-76) are each followed by narratives of Dionysos' power out there on Kithairon (660-777, 1043-52).

The single conflict by which the drama is shaped moves towards the inevitable victory of the god through several phases that transcend the formal division into choral odes and episodes. After we learn in the prologue of the rejection that has caused the crisis, the cult is presented in two of its contrasting aspects (cf. §III), first by the Asiatic maenads of the chorus, whose dithyrambic entry-song (*parodos*, 64-169) presents the rituals and myths of the thiasos, and then by the two old men of Thebes, who stress the importance of universal participation in the cult (206-9).

With the arrival of Pentheus (215) the presentation of the new cult continues, but in antagonism with its enemy. First Teiresias praises the cult at length (266-327) in response to Pentheus' verbal attack on it. Accordingly the chorus in their next song (370-431), and indeed in the three that follow it, contrast the practice and values of Dionysiac cult with those antagonistic to it. In the following (brief) episode (434-518) we learn yet more about the cult, this time in a passage of line-by-line dialogue (*stichomythia*), a traditional feature of tragedy that is especially suited to its content here, Pentheus' interrogation of his captive Dionysos.

With Pentheus' subsequent confinement of the disguised god in the stables of the house the Dionysiac cause seems to reach its lowest ebb, which is suddenly reversed, after the second choral ode (519-75), as the action moves into its third phase, the demonstration of the miraculous powers of the god both in the collapse of the palace and in the subsequent report of the activities of the maenads on the mountainside. This new phase is introduced by Dionysos' exclamation ω (576) and ends with his exclamation $\tilde{\alpha}$ (810), this latter marking another sudden and fundamental reversal of an impasse - from the persistent excited hostility of Pentheus to the incipience of his docile agreement (in a 'light frenzy') to dress as a maenad.

This fourth phase (810-916) both continues to demonstrate the miraculous power of the god - now over the personality of Pentheus - and with its *stichomythia* echoes the earlier *stichomythia* (cf. 924 with 502) while reversing its power relation, in that Pentheus is now under the mysterious control of the captive he then contemptuously interrogated.

In 'winning the contest' (975-6) that remains Dionysos continues to exhibit

miraculous power (1064-83). The sequence that consists of rejection of Dionysos, stichomythia, frenzy, and departure as maenad to Kithairon is in the final scene reversed by the arrival from Kithairon of Agaue in a frenzy, from which she is *extracted* in stichomythia (by Kadmos, 1263-1300), finally to abandon maenadism (1383-7) albeit in sober understanding now (as the remains of the family depart for exile) of the power of Dionysos.

To sum up, the action represents the various powers of Dionysos throughout the (verbal and physical) phases of a single conflict, with the victory of the god assured by two moments of sudden reversal that frame the central section, one physical and one psychological, each marked by a divine exclamation.

This single conflict has many dimensions. It is between two kinds of *power*, but also between two different *perceptions* (to accept Dionysos is to see what otherwise cannot be seen, 923-4) and (it is clear from the choral odes) between two *ethics*. At the heart of these interrelated oppositions there is the astonishing reversibility of gender that gives the play so much of its dramatic power: Pentheus 'seeing what he should see' once he has become even more effeminate than his divine enemy, the maenads on the mountainside acting like warriors (733, 761, 1098), Agaue rushing in as a triumphant but deluded hunter.

How much of all this is specifically Euripidean and how much traditional? Although we have seen indications of a considerable debt to tradition, because that tradition is almost entirely lost the question cannot be answered. More profitable, given the centrality of Dionysos to *Bacchae*, is to explore further the significance of the power of Dionysos both in the play and in what we know of his cult. The play's poetry, emotional power, and dramatic form cannot be fully appreciated without this exploration. We will for example see how the transformation of Pentheus that is at the heart of the play reflects (or rather refracts) the pattern of initiation into the Dionysiac mysteries.

§II. THE *BACCHAE* AND THE DIONYSIAC

Dionysos is unusual among Greek gods in that he has been adopted as a symbol or principle of wide and persistent significance, so much so as to hold a

place in the philosophical discourse of the late twentieth century.²³ The most influential statement of the principle is by Nietzsche, for whom, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Dionysos combines within himself cruelty and mildness (§10), and 'the Dionysiac' unites men with each other, with nature, and with a primal state of unity characterised by contradiction, in which basic divisions are confused: the animals speak, a man feels himself as a god (§1, §7).

The persistence of these ideas is exemplified, over a century later, in Charles Segal's account of 'the coincidence and simultaneity of the god's hidden duality', and of the ways in which, in *Bacchae*, 'Dionysos operates as the principle that destroys differences.'²⁴ Naturally, since Nietzsche Dionysos has, in the structuralist and poststructuralist²⁵ readings of Segal and others, discovered many more differences to destroy, of which I give here some examples. A Theban born, but coming from Asia, Dionysos (and his cult) is both Greek and barbarian. His disguise as a mortal and presence among the maenads seems to confuse the difference between man and god. Himself female in appearance (353n.), he persuades Pentheus to wear female dress, and turns the women of Thebes into warriors and hunters (733, 762-4, 1020-3n.). He also destroys the difference between human and animal, especially in the behaviour of the maenads, driven from domestic space out to the wild periphery, 'running hounds' (732), whose ritual of 'raw-eating' (139) and tearing apart of Pentheus as if he were an animal (1108, etc) inverts the ordered procedure of the sacrifice (a mark of being human not animal) into the bestiality of the hunt (1024-1152n.). Indeed, in appearing himself as an animal (100n.) as well as human and god, Dionysos confuses the tripartite division, central to the Greeks' construction of their world, between god, human, and animal.²⁶

The abolition of differences in *Bacchae* is emphasised also, in a different

²³ E.g. J.Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge 1987) 91-106, 131-6.

²⁴ Segal (1982) 234. A (critical) account of the influence of Nietzsche is by Henrichs in Carpenter and Faraone, 13-43.

²⁵ Inevitably 'deconstruction' has (vainly) attempted, antithetically to the structuralist insistence on binary oppositions in *Bacchae*, to locate Dionysos somewhere beyond them. Dionysos 'does not so much destroy or confuse distinctions as configure the nondifferentiations out of which such distinctions eventually arise . . . Rather than being structured by oppositions that he simply overturns, he has no center and thus escapes the ultimately rational play of oppositional structure named by the terms 'ambiguity' and 'reversal', and 'enables tenuous insight into the character of the binarisms on which civilised life is based': M.Gellrich in B.Goff (ed.) *History, Tragedy, Theory* (Austin Texas, 1995), 53-4.

²⁶ Cf. M.Detienne, *Dionysos Slain* (1979) 59-64, 88-9.