"**Teaching Euripides'** *Bacchae*"

"We sit within our net, we spiders, and whatever we catch in it, we can catch nothing at all except that which allows itself to be caught in precisely *our* net."
(Nietzsche, 73)

Arguably the darkest and fiercest tragedy ever produced, Euripides' Bacchae was written from self-imposed exile in Macedonia and staged posthumously by the dramatist's son (c. 406/5 BC). It is the only surviving Athenian tragedy about Dionysus. This youngest god in the pantheon was the only Olympian born of a mortal woman, one of the few Olympians with no divine consort, the only Olympian who did not treat mortal women as erotic objects, the only Olympian to suffer death, the only Olympian with no fixed site of worship, the only god whose worshipper could be called by the same name as the god himself (Bacchae 491), the most popular god in the townships of Attica, the god with the largest following of any Greek divinity, and *the* god of the Hellenistic Age. As the god of epiphany (der kommende Gott) Dionysus lacks, more than any other Greek deity, a consistent identity, being characterized by duality, contrast, and reversal. (Otto; Burkert; Detienne, Dionysos)

The Bacchae itself is the only extant tragedy in which two characters go mad, the only one to present a god in human disguise, the one most closely tied to the setting of ritual and sacrificial feast, the richest literary source of Dionysian imagery to survive from the fifth century, one of only two tragedies in which the protagonists die at the end (Hippolytus), one of only three tragedies to begin and end with divine appearances (Hippolytus, Ion), one of only three tragedies in which the gods who appear on stage are malevolent and destroy the protagonist (Hippolytus, Heracles), and the one which, more than any other, plays with the theatrical and dramatic potential of disguise (presenting a man dressed as a god disguised as a man, a man dressed as a young military king who then dresses as a woman, and old men dressed as young women dressed in animal skins and other exotic Bacchic trappings). (Dodds, Euripides, Bacchae; Taplin, "Comedy ;" Seaford, Euripides, Bacchae; Bennett Simon; Carpenter and Faraone; Michelini, Euripides). All these features make Euripides' last complete play unique and "deeply untypical" (Taplin, "Comedy " 191).

This essay will examine that untypical uniqueness in two distinct ways. First I present a diachronic literary analysis of the narrative, focussing on the salient themes as they emerge. Second I discuss critically two major interpretive problems, namely how to "read" the chorus and how to "read" Dionysus' vindicitiveness. This two-part approach is intended to mimic a procedure I have found helpful in the classroom, i.e. to analyze the story's unfolding and then to study important thematic cruxes.

Part I

The Prologue (1-63) begins with the entrance of a male actor dressed as a god disguised as a man. Dionysus has come from Asia to Greece where he intends to spread his cult. He will reveal to Thebes his divinity as the son of Zeus and Semele and initiate the city into his mysteries. Why Thebes? Because it is here, his birthplace, that his aunts have denied that Zeus was his father. They insist that Semele was seduced by a mortal. Dionysus punishes this slander by inflicting madness upon them and all Thebes' women and then driving them onto nearby Mt. Cithaeron where they will become his devotees. This opening act of war is designed to vindicate his mother and prove his divinity.

The prologue, then, discloses Dionysus' identity (1-22), his reason for coming (23-46), and his intent (47-63). Several key themes emerge. The Bacchae will be a drama of revelation - of how this androgynous god of wine, dancing, and illusion manifests himself in the world. But the epiphany will be oblique: by indirection he will find direction out, disguising himself as an effeminate Asian stranger and testing Pentheus, the rebel "god-fighter" (theo-machos), through a series of miracles. As the god of madness his weapon of revenge is the imposition of a frenzy on his victims; he attacks the mind. The first miracle is the frenzying and driving of the Theban women onto the mountain. So the prologue establishes the play's spatial coordinates and from this dichotomy (city vs. mountain) emerge the other crucial oppositions: male vs. female, nature vs. culture, reason vs. madness, mortal vs. immortal.

Act One (170-369) sets the stage for the confrontation of the protagonist and antagonist that occurs in Acts 2, 3, and 4 (434-976). Thebes' two most prominent authorities, Tiresias and Cadmus, city seer and city founder, attempt to convert Pentheus. This contest between age and youth is carefully structured, with two short outer scenes framing the main event: 170-214 (= 45 lines) featuring Tiresias and Cadmus; 215-329 (=115 lines) featuring Pentheus and Tiresias; and 330-69 (= 40 lines) featuring Cadmus, Pentheus, and Tiresias. The central scene [Pentheus' first

monologue (215-62)] serves as a second prologue, “a counter-manifesto to the first [prologue] - having heard the god’s programme of action, we now listen to man’s.” (Dodds, Euripides' Bacchae 97). Pentheus believes that Thebes’ women have abandoned the city for the pleasures of Aphrodite and Dionysus. Even Tiresias and Cadmus have been seduced to this bacchic revelry. The city is falling apart. Having already jailed many of the women, Pentheus will now hunt down and decaptitate the Lydian quack.

In **Act II (434-518)** the “showdown” finally begins. The apparent defeat of the Stranger is presented in three stages: 434-450 (= 17 lines), Dionysus bound; 451-502 (= 52 lines), Dionysus unbound; 503-518 (= 16 lines), Dionysus re-bound. One of Pentheus’ soldiers brings the captured Stranger before the king and reports that the jailed Theban Bacchae have escaped: “The chains, of their own accord, came loose from the women’s feet and the keys unlocked the jailhouse doors without a human hand. This man has come here to Thebes full of many miracles.” (447-49). This is the first of several miracles by which Dionysus attempts explicitly to reveal himself to Pentheus. Confronted with his bound enemy, Pentheus asks, “Who are you and from what family?” The Stranger explains that his home is Sardis where he was initiated into Dionysus’ rites. Since those rites are forbidden knowledge to all except the initiated, the Stranger teases Pentheus with hints. Pentheus calls Dionysus a sophist (489), threatens to cut off his hair, take his thyrsus, and lock him up. Dionysus, in his role as the god of liberation, replies: “The god himself will set me free whenever I wish” (498). An angry Pentheus orders his guards to seize Dionysus for his insults: “I have more power than you” (505). The Stranger replies: “You don’t know who you are?” Pentheus fires back with pride: “I am Pentheus, son of Agave and of my father Echion.” “Indeed you are,” says the Stranger, “and that name spells your misfortune.” But Pentheus has no clue, unable to see beyond the narrow world of his walled city and its attendant illusions of male power. Like Nietzsche’s spider he catches nothing except that which allows itself to be caught precisely in his web. This act, then, introduces the problematics of human perspective, of how we see and do not see.

Act II ends with Pentheus locking Dionysus up again and then taking notice of the chorus for the first time (511-14): “And as for these women you’ve brought as collaborators in your evil deeds, either we’ll sell them or I’ll keep them as family possessions, slaves at my looms, after, that is, I’ve stopped their hands from banging out

that rat-a-tat-tat on their drums." Stage convention precluded Pentheus' execution of his extraordinary threat but the harshness of his words reveals his intimidating modus operandi. Indeed his emphatic last word here, kektêsomai, "I shall possess (them)," encapsulates his myopic perspective on what constitutes power.

Act III (576-861), the play's structural and thematic center, has three parts: 576-656 (= 81 lines), Dionysus' epiphany by way of the "palace miracles"; 657-786 (= 130 lines), the first messenger scene; and 787-861 (= 75 lines), Dionysus' persuading Pentheus to dress up as a woman to spy on the mountain-roaming maenads. The long messenger scene describing the magical powers of the Bacchae on Mt. Cithaeron is clearly the center-piece, framed as it is by the two shorter scenes. When Act III begins the stage is empty. Suddenly we hear from offstage a voice:

The voice*:* Io! Hear my voice, hear it! Io Bacchae, Io Bacchae!
Chorus-leader*:* Who is here, who is it? From where does the voice of Euios summon me?
The voice: Io! Again I speak, the son of Semele, the son of Zeus!
Chorus-Leader: Io! Master, master! Come into our revelling band, O Bromios, Bromios!
The voice: Shake the very foundation of this world, august goddess of Earthquakes!
Chorus-Leader: Ah, ah! Look how quickly Pentheus' palace will be shaken to its fall!
Dionysus is in the palace. Worship him!

For twenty-five lines (576-90) the god's voice sings from off-stage while the chorus sing from the orchestra. This must have been stunning in the original performance. Oliver Taplin observes that "nowhere else in Greek tragedy is a god heard calling from off-stage, let alone accompanied by thunder and lightning" (Taplin, Greek Tragedy in Action 120). The earthquake which shakes the palace is the first of four supernatural events which constitute the "palace miracles" - all of which seem designed to answer the prayers of the preceding choral song. The other three miracles, in the aftermath of the quake, are Pentheus' hallucinations about the bull, the burning palace, and the light (615-31); the blazing of Zeus' lightning at Semele's tomb (594-99, 623-24); and the offstage collapse of the stable in which the Stranger had been jailed (633-34). The following passage sets forth the "palace miracle" sequence (615-37):

Chorus-Leader: But didn't he bind your hands in tight nooses? 615

The Stranger*:* In just this I mocked him. He thought he had bound me
when in fact he never even laid a hand on us but fed on his hopes.
Finding a bull in the stables where he had led me as a prisoner
he threw nooses around its knees and hooves,
breathing out fury, sweating profusely from his body, 620
gnashing his teeth into his lips. But I, sitting calmly nearby,
just watched. In the meantime Bacchus came
and shook the palace, kindling a flame on his mother's tomb. When
Pentheus saw this, thinking the palace was burning, he
rushed to and fro, ordering his servants to bring water. 625
Every slave helped in the task but they all labored in vain.
Imagining that I had escaped, he gave up this toil
and darted into the **dark** house with his dagger drawn.
Then Bromios, as it seems to me at least, since I speak only my opinion,
made **a light** in the courtyard. Chasing eagerly after it, Pentheus rushed forward
and tried to stab the **shining [image]**, thinking he was slaying me. 630
In addition to these humiliations, Bacchus outraged him in other ways too.
He smashed the building to the ground. Everything lies shattered
so that now he sees the most bitter consequences of trying to chain me.
From weariness he has dropped his sword and lies exhausted. 635
Though only a man, he dared to fight a god. Calmly leaving the palace,
I have come to you, giving no thought to Pentheus.

The young king's arduous ordeals as he attempts to tie up the bull (i.e. Dionysus) resemble those of the initiand in the Eleusinian mysteries as described by Plutarch who had himself been initiated into the Dionysiac mysteries. At the moment of death, **Plutarch (fr. 178) i**nforms us that

> the soul suffers an experience like those who celebrate the great initiations. . . in the beginning wanderings and wearisome running around in circles and some unfinished journeys half-seen through darkness; then [just] before the consummation [come] all the terrors - panic and trembling and sweat and amazement. And after this a certain miraculous light comes upon you. . .

Analogous to the key features (wandering, terror, bright light) of this Plutarch passage are Pentheus' initiation-like sufferings in the Dionysiac mysteries: panting, sweating, shuddering (620-21); wild rushing about (625-28); darkness (628; cp. 510, 611); the sudden epiphany of miraculous light (630-31) symbolizing the presence of the god; and, finally, the initiand's exhaustion (635). These markers all point to the initiand's ignorance, fear, and confusion. In contrast to Pentheus, whose rite of passage into the joy and knowledge of the Dionysiac mysteries fails, the chorus succeeds here, progressing from fear (604), trembling (607), loneliness (609) and despair (610) - all the result of the earthquake and fire at Semele's tomb - to joy (609) at seeing the great light (608) which they identify with the liberated god. (Seaford, "Dionysiac Drama" 255-57 and Seaford, Euripides' Bacchae 201).

This initiation scene is followed by the centerpiece of Act III, the first messenger's report (677-774 = 98 lines). Laden with an air of mystery, this gripping eye-witness account describes the magical powers of the Theban Bacchae on the mountain. At one point the messenger explains what happened when he and some shepherds attempted to ambush the Bacchae:

> The whole mountain and all its wild creatures
> joined the Bacchic revelry and everything was roused to running.
> Agave happens to jump close by me
> and I leapt out hoping to seize her,
> deserting the thicket where I was hiding myself. 730
> But she shrieked:
>> "O my running hounds,
>> we are being hunted by these men here. Follow me!
>> Follow me, armed like soldiers (hôplismenai) with your thyrsi at hand!"
>
> Only by fleeing did we avoid
> being torn to pieces (sparagmos) by the Bacchae; 735
> but they attacked our grazing calves and not with swords in their hands.
> You could have seen one of them, apart from the others, mauling with both hands
> a young heifer with swelling udders, bellowing all the while;

and other women were ripping apart mature cows, shredding them up (sparagmos).

The frenzied maenads are “armed like soldiers” (hoplites, Greek armored warriors, 733) and their weapons are thyrsi (phallic staffs made of plant materials, carried by worshippers of Dionysus) rather than spears. This sex role reversal (female as hunter and hoplite) anticipates Pentheus’ sex change in the next scene and underscores the androgynous powers of Dionysus, whose very nature is to confuse and defy the traditional dichotomies that so polarized Greek

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Pentheus:	Lead me as quickly as possible. I begrudge the time you're wasting.	820
The Stranger:	Then put on this long dress of fine oriental linen.	
Pentheus:	What are you saying? Instead of being a man shall I join the ranks of women?	
The Stranger:	Yes. I fear they would kill you if you were seen as a man there.	
Pentheus:	Another good point. You're a pretty clever fellow and have been right along.	
The Stranger:	Dionysus instructed us fully in these matters.	825
Pentheus:	How could your advice be successfully carried out?	
The Stranger:	I myself will dress you up once we've gone into the house.	
Pentheus:	In what kind of costume? A woman's? But I would be ashamed (aidôs).	

The "Ah!" at 810 is the play's "monosyllabic turning point," the beginning of the end for Pentheus. (Taplin, Greek Tragedy 158). He now comes under the god's power and loses much of his ability to reason. His erôs (813) to spy on his mother, a sexual desire hitherto disguised, begins to assert itself, however ambivalently (814-15). This is the engine that will drive Dionysus' new strategem. He will coax Pentheus to spy on his mother; in order to do this, however, Pentheus must be dressed up as a maenad. The proud king baulks: "Instead of being a man shall I join the ranks of woman?" (es gunaikas ex andros, 822). Shame (aidôs, 828) inhibits him: "Anything is better than being laughed at (engelan, 842) by the Bacchae." Laughter is the most lethal of weapons in a shame culture like that of the Greeks. In their intensely competitive society one man's victory came at another's expense. Losing the contest (agôn) meant "losing face" before one's peers. And even worse than "losing face" was "losing face" at the hands of women. The centrality of this concern is indicated by the fact that "laughter" (gelôs) words appear ten times in the Bacchae, more than in any other play by Euripides (Dillon). So Pentheus is torn between his erôs and his aidôs, his passion and his shame. As Act III ends, he is uncertain whether to march to the mountain with his weapons or dress as a maenad (845-46). But Dionysus is certain (848-62):

> Women, the man stands within the cast of our net.
> He will come to the Bacchae and pay the penalty of death!
> Dionysus, now the deed is yours - for you are not far off.
> Let us punish him! First put him outside his mind. 850
> Instill a light-headed frenzy (*lyssa*). Since, if reasons well,

he definitely won't be willing to dress in a woman's costume.
But if he drives off the road of reason, he will dress up.
I want the Thebans to mock him
as we parade him through the city in his dainty disguise, 855
after those terrifying threats of his.
I'll go and dress Pentheus up in the very adornments
he'll wear to Hades after being slain by his mother's hands.
He will come to know Dionysus, the son of Zeus,
that he is, in the ritual of initation (*en telei*), a god most terrifying, 860
but for mankind a god most gentle.

This thematic prologue to the play's second half summarizes Dionysus' plan of revenge. The god will instill a frenzy to induce Pentheus to cross-dress. As transvestite the young king will obliterate his old identity and assume a new, Dionysiac, one. In this ambivalent, disorienting rite of passage Pentheus "takes on the very attributes of his alter ego that he most scorns. . . and acts out the opposite of the values of his male peer group: effeminacy instead of masculinity; emotionality instead of rationality; illusion, magic, and trickery instead of realistic clarity, forthrightness, and martial discipline" (Segal, Dionysiac Poetics 171). Thus as the initiand immerses himself into the cult group (thiasos), the individual dies in order to be "born again" into the communion of devotees. It is this Dionysiac experience of ritual death (Pentheus' humiliation and status reversal) that makes Dionysus "a god most terrifying" (860). To others - the uninitiated masses who know the god only through his invention of wine, the stopper of sorrow (278-83) - he is "a god most gentle."

Act IV (912-76 = 65 lines) reverses the situation of Act II (75 lines) where the physically-bound Stranger was ushered in and out by Pentheus. Now the mentally-bound Pentheus, wearing "the costume of a woman, a maenad, a bacchant" (915), is ushered in and out by the Stranger. Dionysus' crescendo of sarcastic feminine nouns registers the immensity, intensity, and vengefulness of the conversion. As Act IV is a mirror of Act II, so Pentheus is now the mirror (at least in physical appearance) of his cousin Dionysus. But Pentheus' divestiture of his regalia symbolizes the physical dissolution of his kingship as well as the psychological dissolution of his mind. Hence his astonishing first words as a bacchant: "And truly I seem to myself to see two suns

and a double Thebes, that fortress of seven mouths. And you seem to be a bull leading us in front and horns seem to have sprouted on your head. But were you a beast before? Because certainly you are a bull now." Scholars suggest various explanations for Pentheus' surrealistic double vision: that his "light-headed frenzy" (851) has distorted his eyesight; that he is drunk with the god's wine; that he is looking into a ritual mirror; that the suppressed duality of his psyche has broken loose. These interpretations all, perhaps, contain some element of truth. On a more literal level Pentheus' two suns and two Thebes evoke the play's antithetical double topography: mountain (Theban females led by the mother) vs. city (Theban males led by the son). This is a play, after all, that takes place in a city (virtually) emptied of women. As iron-fisted Greek king in the costume of an effeminate Asian bacchant, Pentheus now straddles both these worlds of Dionysus, but as androgynous voyeur, eager to "witness sexual acts without being ensnared in the complexities of his own desires" (Nussbaum, Introduction Williams, The Bacchae xxxiv), he fits in neither. Pentheus' altered vision includes the Stranger incarnate as a horned bull. This is the same beast he vainly tried to tie up earlier, "breathing out fury, sweating profusely from his body, gnashing his teeth into his lips" (618-21). Like a mystagogue leading his anxious initiate, this horned bull, symbol of male virility, will now escort Pentheus to the mountain to spy on his mother's sexual proclivities. The arresting image suggests that Pentheus' own unleashed erôs will, at last, escort him into the strange realm of Dionysiac secrets he so desires to see. It turns out, then, that in his weird hallucinations there does indeed lie an ambiguous element of truth. (Kirk, The Bacchae 100). Proud of his fashion-modelling skills, the preening Pentheus asks the Stranger (925-26), "How do I look, then? Don't I carry myself like Ino or like Agave, my mother?" So completely does he resemble his mother that probably the actor playing Pentheus will return as Agave (1186) needing only to change his mask (Seaford, Euripides: Bacchae 224). The irony, of course, is that she will be carrying the head of her son, thinking he is a beast. Such is the violent grace of this most terrifying god.

Act V (1024-1152) has as its highlight the second messenger's speech (1043-1152) describing the tearing apart (*sparagmos*) of his master by Agave (1125-47):

> Seizing his left arm with her forearms
> and pressing her foot against the doomed man's ribs
> she tore off his shoulder, not by her own strength -

> no, the god gave a special ease to her hands. . . . The ribs were laid bare
> by the tearing apart. All the women, with blood-spattered hands,
> were playing ball with Pentheus' flesh. . . . But the pitiful head, the very one
> which his mother just then happened to take with her hands,
> she impales on the tip of her thyrsus and carries it,
> as if it were the head of a mountain lion, through the middle of Cithaeron,
> leaving behind her sisters in the choruses of dancing maenads.
> Rejoicing in her ill-fated prey she comes inside these city walls
> calling upon the Bacchic god as the fellow huntsman,
> the comrade in the chase, the triumphant victor
> but for her he brings only tears as a victory-prize.

About this horrific climax one scholar has written about how "Euripides creates a Pentheus who is transformed visually into a symbol of Dionysus. Pentheus becomes the thyrsus of the god: first he is crowned with long hair and a mitra [headband], then he himself crowns the tip of a fir tree raised by the maenads on the mountain, and finally he becomes the literal crown of the thyrsus carried by his mother" (Kalke 410).

The Epilogue (1165-1392) begins with the entry of the frenzied Agave, "sacred priest" of the slaughter of the mounted beast (1108-14), dancing with Pentheus' blood-stained head/mask impaled on her thyrsus. She bids the chorus to join her feast. Though these Asian maenads celebrate their enemy's murder, cannibalism is beyond even their limits. Eventually Cadmus, in the first psychotherapy scene in Western literature (1263-1300), coaxes his daughter out of madness. Suddenly the god appears *ex machina* to announce the fates of Cadmus and Agave, to proclaim his Olympian ancestry, and to chastise Thebes' founder (1345-48):

Dionysus: You were late to understand us. When you ought to have known us, you did not.
Cadmus: We have realized our mistakes now. But your punishment is too severe.
Dionysus: Yes, but I am a god and was treated with hybris by you.
Cadmus: Gods ought not be like mortals in their passions (orgê).

The god's vengeful passion leaves us so frozen in horror and sadness that we can only wonder if

Gloucester was not right: “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods, They kill us for their sport.” Dionysus’ wrath has progressively ripped apart the polis, the psyche, and the body. (Segal, “The Menace of Dionysus") As William Arrowsmith writes, “so terrible is his demonstration of *force majeure*, so indiscrimate his revenge, that in the end Dionysus proves that he is no god at all - if by god one means something that can be prayed to or that feels pity or concern." (Arrowsmith, “Euripides’ Bacchae, 66)

Part II

I should like now, in the second portion of this essay, to take up two central problems of interpretation that have been hotly debated in recent years. As a springboard here I will use the introduction of Paul Woodruff's recent translation because, even though I often disagree with his interpretations, he focusses on the important questions.

The first question regards the chorus of Asian Bacchae. Woodruff claims that the "message of the play, as delivered by the chorus, is that peace, order, and control come through cult, and not through force of weapons (Pentheus' choice) or through the New Learning (which Tiresias represents)." (Woodruff xvi) And as true initiates into Dionysus' mystery religion they link "two feelings that strike noninitiates as contrary - ecstasy and moderation - but these are in fact united in the experience of the initiate and they are united without a residue of tension. The chorus is at peace with itself." (Woodruff xxxvi). Well, this chorus may initially preach that peace, order, and control come through cult, but that preaching regresses significantly over time. And while these Asian Bacchae may be at peace with themselves, it is not at all clear that we should be at peace with them. (Kirk, The Bacchae 10)

As the Stranger leads Pentheus off to Mt. Cithaeron to spy on the Theban Bacchae, the chorus sings this chilling refrain (991-96 = 1011-16): "Let justice go openly. Let sword-bearing justice go forth, slaying Pentheus right through the throat - the godless, lawless, just earth-born offspring of Echion." And a few lines later (1020-24): "Go, Bacchus, and with a laughing face cast the noose of death on the hunter of the Bacchae when he attacks the herd of maenads." Then, after the second messenger reports Pentheus' death (1030), in a passage where "the radical, antipolis spirit of this chorus emerges most powerfully" (Segal, "Chorus and Community" 75). Segal elsewhere notes that "In the Bacchae the communal, civic voice has disappeared. The chorus of Lydian maenads who make up the chorus occupy a situation almost unique in Greek tragedy,

namely hostility to the city…. They interact with the citizens of the polis far less than do most choruses in Greek tragedy, and in fact they speak only thirteen iambic trimeters in the extant portion of the play" (Segal, "Classics" 19). The chorus-leader sings in a meter of excitement: "O lord Bromios, you have revealed yourself a mighty god!" The messenger is astonished: "What do you mean? Why do you say this? Do you truly rejoice, woman, in the misfortunes of one who was my master?… It is not honorable, women, to rejoice at the evils that have been done." (1032--40). After the messenger has described the tearing apart of Pentheus by Agave, the whole chorus cries out (1153-55, 1160-64): "Let us lift up our feet and dance for Bacchus! Let us lift up our voices and shout for the doom of Pentheus…. Cadmean Bacchae, you have made your victory hymn renowned, but it ends in a dirge of wailing, of tears. A fine contest - to plunge your hands in the blood of your child so that they drip with his blood." A fine contest? Their "triumphant sarcasm" reveals that for Dionysus' devotees justice means revenge which, in this case, means virtual murder (992-94) (Seaford, Euripides: Bacchae 241). To be sure, the standard Greek moral code was to help one's friends and harm one's enemies. Punishment is one thing, but their Medea-like desire for such savage revenge is not what one would expect from religious initiates who had earlier sung the praises of "the tranquil life and prudent thinking" (390). Their vindicitive spirit, echoing that of Dionysus, does not tally with Woodruff's claim about this chorus as the embodiment of peace, order, and moderation. If the devotees of this god can so enthusiastically rejoice in the brutal ripping apart of a son by his frenzied mother and her Dionysiac revellers ("All the women, with blood-spattered hands, were playing ball with Pentheus' flesh." 1135-36) one wonders what benefits this kind of religious fanaticism would bring to the polis. One could claim that it is natural for the chorus to want to see their would-be enslaver punished by Dionysus. (Seaford, Euripides: Bacchae 219) But their praise of Agave's impaling of her own son's head on her thyrsus (1141) is ignoble at best.

In sum, the progression of the odes towards a celebration of such violence raises, in my estimation, fatal objections to much of Woodruff's interpretation of the chorus. Although he recognizes (xxvi) that we must not be seduced by the chorus because "their religion is not all sweetness and light" the preponderance of his discussion privileges the peaceful aspect of the Bacchae. Yet it is their darker side, "the animal horror of their 'black' maenadism" that is emphasized in the latter half of the play. (Dodds , Euripides: Bacchae xlvii; 159).

A second related question is raised by these considerations and is well articulated by

Woodruff (xxxxii): "Any fully adequate interpretation, however, must deal in some way with the moral problem posed by Dionysos' excessive anger against his human family, and it should explain why Euripides puts his emphasis on this excess." Nussbaum (1990) xxxv-xlii asks a similar question ["Can Dionysus really become civilized?" xxxiv] and answers it from a very insightful "trans-Aristotelian" perspective. This is indeed a crucial question but as best I can tell Woodruff does not answer it. After raising this important question, Woodruff reviews various interpretations of the play before stating his own conclusions (xxxxviii-xlii) which are, in sum, that the play is an attack on the New Learning (i.e. sophistry) which flourished in the late fifth century and that the "point of the play is not that we should be content with mystery and give up our ambition for a clear understanding….The point, rather, is that clear understanding come only by way of initiation, and not by active intellectual efforts." (xli-xlii) These observations, whether one agrees with them or not, do not address the issue of Dionysus' vindicitiveness. In my own translation (Esposito) I suggested a double answer (psychological and socio-political) to this question, following the leads of William Arrowsmith, Charles Segal, and Bernard Knox. On the one hand, there is a crucial psychological element to Dionysus' taurine ferocity. As an androgynous boundary-crossing god, there is a way in which he embodies a repressed part of Pentheus, especially that feminine side of the young king which remains largely inaccessible to him. As Nietzsche said, "The degree and kind of a man's sexuality reach up into the ultimate pinnacle of his spirit" (Nietzsche, Beyond 81). Pentheus' suppression of this natural part of the human psyche ("the force that through the green fuse drives the flower," in Dylan Thomas' phrase) leads to an eruption of volcanic proportions as his *eros* (812) explodes, tearing him to pieces as he struggles unsuccessfully to release, through voyeurism, his passion for seeing "the feminine other" on the forbidden wild mountain.

Besides this psychological narrowness, Pentheus' failed rite of passage into manhood is caused partly by his procrustean perspective on what constitutes social order, which as Segal observes, is, in his case, "a warrior-society of obedient, disciplined male citizens in hoplite ranks who protect the enclosed, walled space of the city in which the women are safely secluded and secured." (Segal, “The Menace of Dionysus" 204). Pentheus' tragedy of the self implies a tragedy for the city not least because the self in question is the king. Just as we witness the progressive fragmentation of Pentheus' palace, psyche, and body, so we witness the fragmentation of Thebes as the women are driven to the wild mountain so that the city contains only men. It may well be that this splitting of the palace and polis in Euripides' play represents a larger cultural sparagmos as

revealed in the brutal power politics of the Peloponnesian War. In other words, as Bernard Knox suggests, it may be that

> Euripides, in his presentation of divine intervention in human affairs, had in mind the conduct and the language of the imperial city-states of his own day…. The prime concern of the city state is maintenance of its prestige, manifestation of its power as a warning to potential rebels or amibitious neighbors. As with Euripides' gods, no insult, offense or threat to that power can be allowed to pass unnoticed. Honor must be maintained.("Divine Intervention" 228-29)

Woodruff (xxxvii) criticized this interpretation, as articulated by me (Esposito 18), for "reading into fifth-century attitudes the harsh judgments of Thucydides." Given that Thucydides' History and Euripides' (contemporaneous) tragedies explore similar themes (Finley 1-54), I do not understand Woodruff's criticism. Because historical contextualizing of "late" Euripides is crucial to the present argument I will quote at length here what seems to me the most incisive account of the matter. Arrowsmith argues that Euripides' last plays (Phoenician Women, Orestes, Iphigeneia at Aulis, and Bacchae), all written in the closing decade of the fifth century, represent a searching critique of Athenian culture. Why does Euripides undertake this project?

> The cumulative disaster of the Peloponnesian War [431-404], the plague [c. 430-427], the rise of demagogues, and the emergence of radical self-interest became the determinants of both public and private life. So that as the delicately adjusted mutual relations of moral density attenuated, centrifugal forces more and more prevailed over the centripetal. This is the desperately anomic [lawless] Athens so graphically depicted in the last plays, all socialized tragedies, and all unmistakably apocalyptic (in the dissonance of their cadence). The themes are persistent from play to play: the absence of leadership or leadership committed to political bad faith; the active corruption of the citizenry, deemed incapable of responding morally, and to that degree morally incapacitated by its own immoral leaders; the dissolvent strife of selfish individualism; the perversion of *arete* [excellence, prowess] and the general inversion or voiding of moral terms; the disappearance of moderates and moderation alike by the polarization of political life; and, last but far from least, the convergence of brutal divine behavior embodied in myth with political brutality in human affairs. In the Phoenissae heaven, through an oracle, demands the sacrifice of the innocent

> Menoikeus; Dionysus in the Bacchae, in quest of his own *philotimia* [coveting of honor], makes a mother kill her own son; in the Orestes a god commands a boy to murder his mother; in the Iphigeneia at Aulis the goddess Artemis commands a father, already enslaved to his own lifelong politics of bad faith, to kill his daughter in order to free his fleet from Aulis and prosecute the war of the "free Greeks" against Trojan "barbarians" and "slaves." The convergence between myth and behavior has of course been heightened by the dramatist in order to confront the audience with its own social and cultural reality, to make it respond morally to the immoral spectacle which is created by, and imitiates, its own politics, the narrowing but still sizeable gap between its received and operative values. Dramaturgically, the plays have all been shaped to enable that moral response by stating the situation in its extremest form. Thus the myths have all been even more violently anachronized than in the early plays; the setting is not merely fifth century, but the century's final, desperate decade. (my underlining) [1]

Arrowsmith's analysis, I believe, helps situate Dionysus' vindictiveness in a larger dramatic and cultural context and thereby provides an instructive supplement to the psychological reading that I discussed earlier. From a contrary point of view, Richard Seaford reads the end of the play in a positive light, arguing that the demise of the oppressive Pentheus represents Thebes' liberation by Dionysus and that the god, in his final epiphany, establishes himself and his cult as a vital and cohesive force for the city (Seaford, Euripides: Bacchae 44-52) But it is difficult to see how a mother desiring to cannibalize her son (1184) or, at the play's emotional climax, a mother and grandfather struggling to reassemble Pentheus' corpse on stage could be sources of civic cohesion (Esposito 89 and 97) Neither the text, the stage action, nor the emotional impetus of the epilogue support such a consoling reading. (Segal, Dionysiac 382-85; Griffin 52-54). The emphasis is not on the salvation of the city but on the lamentation, desolation, and pity of the human characters. As Taplin observes,

> Bakchai pointedly closes with the break-up of both family and polis. It might easily have ended with a triumphal Dionysiac departure by the chorus, off to spread the blessings of the god to another city - even to Athens! It might, that is, have ended with metatheatrical celebration, but it doesn't; and in that it epitomizes tragedy's refusal to take the easy or

comforting way out of the terrors it enacts (Taplin, "Comedy" 197).

The pathetic image of a Bacchic mother, driven mad by the angry son of Zeus, raising the impaled head of her own son on a cultic thyrsus in honor of her Bacchic god, this horrific image translates the dramatist's final prophetic vision. It is not difficult to imagine that after watching the savage twenty-five year sparagmos of Athens and Sparta, all the aging playwright could summon was pity and fear. It was too late now for anything else; too late for Pentheus and Agave, too late for Athens, and even too late, apparently, for the genre of tragedy itself, with her stage building shattered by a Dionysiac earthquake, her protagonist torn to pieces by his own mother, and her royal mask disembodied by the theater god's most zealous devotee.

1 From an unpublished manuscript of the second of Arrowsmith's four Bampton lectures on Euripides delivered at Columbia University in 1984. The first Bampton lecture has been published (Arrowsmith, "Euripides and the Dramaturgy of Crisis"). All four of Arrowsmith's Bampton lectures (as well as his collected essays on Greek drama) will be forthcoming in a volume entitled _Euripides and the Dramaturgy of Crisis_, ed. S. Esposito; for similar observations on Euripides as cultural critic see "The Criticism of Greek Tragedy," and, focussing more specifically on the _Bacchae_, Arrowsmith's introduction to his translation in Grene and Lattimore.