

The Bacchae: Euripides' Critical Portrayal

Of the Cult of Dionysus

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Numerous scholars have utilized the *Bacchae* as a tool for verifying the disposition of the Cult of Dionysus. In this discourse, I will demonstrate Euripides' critical portrayal of the Cult of Dionysus using a concise set of parameters. To fully explicate Euripides' critical portrayal of the Cult of Dionysus it is first necessary to demonstrate the profound effect that theatre had on Greek society, especially with regards to Euripides, whose critical portrayal of Dionysiac worship would have greatly influenced the public's perception of the cult. The *Bacchae* sheds light on a number of sinister rituals that were thought to be a part of the collective impression of Dionysiac worship, which appears to be fundamentally dangerous. The rituals of the Cult of Dionysus would have seemed threatening to the uninitiated because of the emphasis on dissolving gender roles, the sinister nature of the rites, the secrecy ascribed to the cult, the challenging of social constraints, the divergence from reality, and the deviant behaviors that were associated with Dionysiac worship. These forementioned parameters will be the basis of my analysis of the *Bacchae*.

### **I. Euripides & The Art of Theatre in Classical Greek Society**

The English word 'theatre,' comes from the Greek term *theatron*, meaning 'viewing place,' and it played a paramount role in religious festival life. Attendance at plays held during religious festivals in cities like Athens drew crowds on an immense scale, comparable to the turnouts at football games today. These performances were organized in honour of the festival's god. P.E. Easterling explains that "Athens, where drama developed many of its most significant traditions, the main Dionysus festival, held in the spring, was one of the most important events in the city's calendar, attracting large numbers of citizens and visitors from elsewhere in the Greek

world.”<sup>1</sup> This festival would consist of three sets of three tragedies, a satyr play, five comedies, and as many as 20 *dithyrambs* (performances involving songs and dancing) in the hopes of gaining Dionysus' favour. The *dithyrambs* were performed by choruses from the separate tribes in attendance, and offered a chance for pleasant competition between the groups.

Due to the large scale on which plays were seen, it is apparent that playwrights garnered a sizeable influence over the populace of Greece. Euripides (c. 485-405 BCE), who produced at least 18 plays during his lifetime would have been a principal example of this impact. Theatre played such an integral part in Greek society that authors would bring their plays to competitions where prizes were given to the winners. During his lifetime, Euripides participated in competitions against writers like Aeschylus and Sophocles, who were also considered great tragedians. As a consequence of the profound role theatre had on Greek society, Euripides' *Bacchae* likely had a substantial effect on the public's perception of Dionysiac worship. The portrayal of Dionysiac worship in the *Bacchae* is acutely severe, which probably inclined the uninformed observer to have misgivings about the Cult of Dionysus and its practices.

## II. Evidence for the Existence of the Cult of Dionysus

The earliest evidence that verifies the existence of mystery cults as a whole is the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which was arguably composed between 650-550 BCE. Concerning the Cult of Dionysus, Richard Seaford presents a number of primary sources from both the Greek and Roman eras. His first piece of evidence is found in Attic vase painting from the sixth century BCE, where the mystery-cult of Dionysus is illustrated.<sup>2</sup> Another remnant of evidence that

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<sup>1</sup> P.E. Easterling, "Introduction" in Euripides, *Bacchae* (trans. David Franklin; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Seaford, *Dionysos* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 51.

Seaford presents is an inscription from Cumae in southern Italy (dated to the fifth century BCE) that “forbids burial ‘in this’ (ie. presumably plot of land) to any one who is not *bebakcheumenos*.”<sup>3</sup> *Bebakcheumenos* refers to a person who is ‘inspired by frenzy with Dionysus,’ which gives the impression that the mystery-cult may have been connected to this site. Another source of evidence from the classical Greek era is the tragedy written by Euripides. His writing describes the founding of the Cult of Dionysus, which originated in Thebes, where Zeus through Semele begot Dionysus. Dionysus possesses the women of Thebes, and forces them into the woods where they engage in deviant behavior that would later become associated with the rituals of Dionysus’ mystery-cult. One more Greek source that mentions the mystery-cult is 3 Maccabees. Hans-Josef Klauck claims, on the basis of 3 Macc 2:27-30, “Ptolemy IV Philopator even attempted to compel the Jews of Alexandria to take part in the Dionysiac mysteries, or to threaten them with branding with a symbol of Dionysus.”<sup>4</sup> Following the demise of Greece, a number of other authors also mention the mystery-cult of Dionysus from the Roman era, namely Ovid (c.43BCE-17CE) and Livy (c.59BCE-17CE).

### III. The Nature of Dionysus & The Purportedly Sinister Nature of Dionysiac Rituals

The god Dionysus is often portrayed as the son of Zeus. The *Bacchae* opens with Dionysus justifying himself as a god based on his descent. Lines 1-3 state, “I, Dionysus, son of Zeus, have come to the land of Thebes! Semele, the daughter of Cadmus, gave birth to me on the day she was sent into labour by the fire of lightning.”<sup>5</sup> In support of this genealogy Hesiod

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<sup>3</sup> Seaford, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 113.

<sup>5</sup> All translations come from: Euripides, *Bacchae*, trans. David Franklin. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

claims in his work *Theogony* (c. 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) that “Semele, Cadmus’ daughter, lay with him in love and became the mother of a son with a glorious destiny – Dionysus the giver of joy.”<sup>6</sup> Here we see that Dionysus is not only the son of Zeus, but he is also associated with joy. Dionysus is often associated with “joy” because of his identification as the god of wine.<sup>7</sup> Dionysus’ association with wine has also applied him to the god of all vegetal growth. For instance, Plutarch explains that Dionysus is the master of every kind of “liquid growth.”<sup>8</sup> In *Bacchae*, it is plain that Dionysus is associated with ivy, which is demonstrated in the Prologue, where Dionysus explains, “So in this land of Greece itself, it is Thebes I have first set ringing with cries, dressed the people in fawnskins, and put the thyrsus, the spear of ivy, into their hands” (lines 18-20). The spear referred to in this passage is made up of a fennel rod, called a narthex, that when wreathed in ivy becomes the thyrsus; the “ivy spear.” Christine Kalke proposes, “The ivy cluster itself becomes an important element in Euripides’ treatment of the Bacchic wand since, without it, the wand is not a thyrsus. A process of transformation is involved; only when crowned with leaves and raised by the Bacchic worshipper does the simple narthex, the fennel rod, acquire the power and symbolic value of the thyrsus.”<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, Dionysus’ attachment to nature includes his identification with animals. Seaford substantiates this claim, explaining, “In the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysos* not only does he create a vine (and ivy), and a shaggy bear: he himself turns into a roaring lion.”<sup>10</sup> Dionysus’ association with animals can also be seen in the *Bacchae* where Dionysus takes the form of a

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<sup>6</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. Norman Brown. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1953), p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Dionysus is also associated with “joy” in Homer’s *Iliad*, where he is referred to as a “joy for mortals” (*Iliad* 14.325). Euripides also designates the god alongside wine in the *Bacchae* where the chorus chants, “And the leader is bromios, *euoi!* The ground flows with milk, flows with wine” (lines 121-122).

<sup>8</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, 365.

<sup>9</sup> Christine M. Kalke, “The Making of a Thyrsus: The Transformation of Pentheus in Euripides’ *Bacchae*,” *American Journal of Philology* 106 (1985): 409.

<sup>10</sup> Seaford, p. 23.

bull (lines 778-780). This animal imagery is also applied to the female disciples of Dionysus (the bacchantes) in the *Bacchae*, where these women are dressed “with boughs of oak and fir, and decorate cloaks of dappled fawnskin with fringes of white wool” (lines 94-96). The women of Thebes who are possessed into leaving the city to dwell in the woods by Dionysus in the *Bacchae* are attired in these garments of nature, verifying Dionysus' association with nature.

In addition to all of the physical characteristics associated with Dionysus and his cultic worshippers, the god is also noted for his ability to affect the psychological states of men and women. Hans-Josef Klauck uses the *Bacchae* as his focus text to describe three increasingly abnormal mental states (ecstasy, enthusiasm, and mania) that are associated with Dionysus and his cultic worshippers. Klauck defines the state of ‘ecstasy’ as “the human person’s transcendence of the narrow boundaries of the self.”<sup>11</sup> The state of ‘enthusiasm’ is defined by Klauck as, “The state of being filled by God.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, Klauck describes the state of ‘mania’ as, “The intoxicating madness which bursts the bounds of what is normal through conspicuous behaviour.”<sup>13</sup> These deviant psychological states resound throughout the *Bacchae*, demonstrating the sinister nature of the cult based on the mental distress precipitated by Dionysus.

Before explicating why the Cult of Dionysus was perceived as being sinister, it is necessary to describe the foundations of Greek religion, and how the Cult of Dionysus may have deviated from the accepted practices of the day, specifically concerning offerings, sacrifices, and *enthousiasmos* (enthusiasm) and ecstasy. Concerning sacrifice, Burkert explains, “The sacrifice is a festive occasion for the community. The contrast with everyday life is marked with washing, dressing in clean garments, and adornment, in particular, wearing a garland woven from twigs on

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<sup>11</sup> Klauck, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> Klauck, p. 107.

<sup>13</sup> Klauck, p. 107.

the head.”<sup>14</sup> This explanation demonstrates the special nature of sacrifice, and how sacrifice was an occasion for the community to come together in dedication to the gods. In opposition to the communal bonding as the focus of sacrifice found in standard Greek religion, the Cult of Dionysus practiced their rituals away from the populace, leading to suspicions of deviant practices including sexual misconduct.

In accord with this claim, Ross Kraemer posits, “From the detailed descriptions in Euripides’ play, one might argue that the *Bacchae* describes actual rituals practiced by Greek women prior to or contemporaneous with Euripides’ own lifetime.<sup>15</sup> What is most notable about the rituals that are alluded to in the *Bacchae* is the radical role of women. In the era that Euripides would have written, women were confined to activities around their place of residence, therefore “The temporary abstinence from marital sexual obligations that is also reflected in the activities attributed to the worshippers of Dionysus,”<sup>16</sup> would have challenged gender constraints. This might have caused a general sense of misgiving to be associated with the cult. The kinds of women that would have been attracted to the Cult of Dionysus were widows (who would not have lost many of their rights without a husband) and those without children (who

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1987), p. 56. Sacrifice was seen as a distinctive type of dedication to the gods that would have been done on communal occasions, whereas everyday dedications to the gods were designated as offerings. The four main types of offerings are: gifts (relinquishing the first fruits of the harvest, whether it be figs, olives, or bread – all burnt to the gods), votive (voluntary act of renunciation – giving up spoils of war), libations (pouring out drink to the gods), and prayer.

<sup>15</sup> Ross Kraemer, “Ecstasy and Possession: The Attraction of Women to the Cult of Dionysus,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 72 (1979): 60. She goes on to explain, “Such rites might have included nocturnal wanderings on the mountains, the nursing of baby wild animals, frenzied dancing, the consumption of wine, honey and milk, and possibly the performance of a two-part sacrificial ritual, the *sparagmos* (“rendering apart”) and *omophagia* (“consuming raw”) of a wild beast.” The nocturnal wanderings in the mountains that Kraemer describes can be found in the *Parados*, lines 100-103 of the *Bacchae* where the women are waiting, “far from their shuttles and looms.” The consumption of wine is described as a ritual of the bacchantes in the Third Episode where a bacchant “struck her staff against the ground, and for her the god sent up a spring of wine” (lines 595-596). The frenzied dancing and the two-part sacrificial ritual is alluded to in lines 115-119 – “Dionysus is glad when someone in the mountains falls to the ground from the whirling bands, wearing the sacred cloak of fawnskin, hunting the blood of goat-slaughter, the joy of eating raw flesh.”

<sup>16</sup> Kraemer, p. 67.

were marginalized because of the inability to continue their family's bloodline). In substantiation of this claim, Kraemer asserts, "women who fail to meet their society's measure of a woman will be attracted to religious activities which specifically address the measure of a woman."<sup>17</sup> In addition to the marginalized women that were probably attracted to the cult, married women were likely equally attracted to the cult in an attempt to change their socio-biological statuses, These claims demonstrate the variety of different circumstances that women in the Cult of Dionysus would have come from, suggesting the dominance of women in the cult of Dionysus. Euripides even titles his play "*Bacchae*," which means 'female worshippers of the god Bacchus (Dionysus),'

The Cult of Dionysus also deviated from everyday Greek religion with regards to enthusiasm and ecstasy. The term enthusiasm is used by Burkert to encompass "the overwhelming experiences of a changed and extended consciousness."<sup>18</sup> Therefore, enthusiasm includes the mental states of possession and ecstasy. While divine possession and the state of ecstasy (an emotional or religious frenzy or trancelike state) are perceivable themes in many religions, they are amplified in Dionysiac worship. In support of this assertion, Burkert states, "In the Dionysos cult ecstasy plays a quite unique role, with the result that Dionysos almost acquires a monopoly over enthusiasm and ecstasy."<sup>19</sup> The trancelike state of ecstasy, coupled with godly possession is most effectively demonstrated in lines 617-643 of the *Bacchae* where the *maenads*<sup>20</sup> rip-apart and imbibe a herd of cattle under the influence of Dionysus.

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<sup>17</sup> Kraemer, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> Burkert, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> Burkert, p. 110.

<sup>20</sup> Franklin, p. 4. Franklin explains, "The term came to be synonymous with bacchantes – women inspired by Dionysus."

In conclusion, the Cult of Dionysus garnered a lot of disrepute based on the secretive and deviant nature of their rituals. Seaford points to the writings of Livy in support of the threatening disposition of the cult, stating, "Dionysiac mystery-cult could be presented as a threat to the political order (*Bacchae*, Livy 39)." <sup>21</sup> Livy was a Roman historian who lived around 400 years after Euripides, so it is clear that the Cult of Dionysus had continued to accumulate negative stigma throughout its existence. In addition, the importance of women in the cult detracted from the public's view of the cult because women were seen as inferior to men, and the cult's emphasis on the measure of a woman would have seemed deviant. It is evident that Euripides maintained these same beliefs in his descriptions of the cult within the *Bacchae*, which will be the nucleus of the following section.

#### **IV. Euripides' Negative Portrayal of Dionysiac Worship in the *Bacchae***

Throughout the *Bacchae* there exists an abundance of critical references to Dionysiac cultic worship, and Dionysus as a deity. Euripides presents the actions of the Cult of Dionysus as deviating from societal standards, and the cult should therefore be recognized as being dangerous. To fully explicate Euripides' negative portrayal of the cult it is necessary to analyze the *Bacchae* chronologically. As the plot intensifies, the actions of Dionysus and his *maenads* become increasingly sinister, culminating in the dismemberment of Pentheus by Agave. Scholars who have closely examined the *Bacchae* demonstrate a number of recurring unfavorable associations that Euripides applies to Dionysus and his *bacchantes* throughout the play. David Franklin, whose translation of the *Bacchae* is central to this analysis postulates, "This play is very much about

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<sup>21</sup> Seaford, p. 50.

normal life being turned upside-down under the influence of Dionysus.”<sup>22</sup> Dionysus accomplishes this overthrow via the manipulation of the minds of mortals, namely the bacchantes and Pentheus, and it is a principal thread within this text.

Christine Kalke presents a nearly identical argument, but terms the concept ‘transformation.’ She states, “The motif of transformation is important in the *Bacchae* and has been viewed variously as transformation from man to beast, from hunter to hunted, from powerful pursuer to powerless victim, from repressed to expressed sexuality, from reality to illusion or illusion to reality.”<sup>23</sup> This view, with its contrasting sets of opposites further demonstrates the importance of understanding the divergent nature of Dionysus. Walter Burkert also suggests that “The role of the sexes becomes less important”<sup>24</sup> in the mysteries of Dionysus. This dissolution of the genders (would challenge the social constraints of the era) is best demonstrated in the bacchantes ability to physically overpower the men. Additionally, Dionysus and his cult are portrayed as being sinister throughout the *Bacchae*. The forementioned associations will be the foundation on which the proceeding verses will be judged.

The first time we see the sinister nature of the cult is with regards to the women of the Thebes that Dionysus has maddened, and subsequently drawn from the city into the wilderness in lines 100-103 of the *Parados*, or entry of the chorus. The verses state, “ To the mountain, to the mountain! There where the throng of women waits, far from their shuttles and looms, stung to madness by Dionysus.” The rituals of the cult of Dionysus were done away from the general populace (in nature, or in this case, the mountains), and this secrecy would naturally have made the rituals of the Cult of Dionysus seem sinister, or ominous to the uninitiated. The description of

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<sup>22</sup> Franklin, p. 44.

<sup>23</sup> Kalke, p. 410.

<sup>24</sup> Burkert, p. 291.

being “stung to madness by Dionysus” implies that the bacchantes were powerless to resist participating in this deviant behavior. This is shown through the use of the verb “stung,” which suggests a level of pain (like a bee sting) was caused in Dionysus’ possession of the women. The absolute control (madness) Dionysus exerts over the women demonstrates his influence over the minds of mortals.

The audiences that would have witnessed Euripides’ plays had misogynistic ideas about the role of women in society. In this era, women belonged in the household, where weaving was the accepted profession, therefore the description of being “far from” their residence would have challenged accepted social constraints, and would have been classified as deviant behavior. Ross Kraemer presents a similar argument (with different vocabulary – exchanging “socio-biological sphere” for “social constraints”), in which she states, “This motif of the reversal of normal states and judgments occurs in the sphere of socio-biological roles as well. Women possessed by Dionysus are compelled to abandon, at least temporarily, their domestic obligations of housework and child-rearing in favor of the worship of the god.”<sup>25</sup> Kraemer’s claim is magnified by the sheer volume of the women from Thebes who left their duties behind to worship Dionysus in the mountains.

Not only is deviance demonstrated with regards to the cult in the sense of social norms, but it is also established with regards to rituals. A deviant ritual that is alluded to in lines 115-121 of the *Parados* concerns the nature of sacrifice. These lines describe actions that make Dionysus “glad” (line 115). These actions include, “Hunting the blood of goat-slaughter, the joy of eating raw flesh” (lines 118-119). The consumption of raw flesh is translated to Greek as “omophagia,” which Hans-Josef Klauck describes as a “survival of an older cultural stage, and at the same time

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<sup>25</sup> Kraemer, p. 60.

something that breaks through the civilized world of everyday life.”<sup>26</sup> In these verses Euripides is ascribing an especially deviant behavior to Dionysiac worship that would have seemed sinister to the average Greek citizen. In support of this assertion, Franklin states, “The wildness of the rites culminated in the eating of raw flesh. The dominant emotion for participants was joy. Outsiders, like Pentheus, tended to feel suspicion, revulsion or fear.”<sup>27</sup> The deviant behaviors substantiated in lines 115-121 are not only further evidence of the sinister nature of the cult, but the behaviors would have also been scrutinized even more severely due to the radical nature of *omophagia*.

In the Second Episode, after the capture of Dionysus (although he has not yet manifested himself as the god yet) Pentheus inquires, “Do you practise your worship at night or by day” (line 395). Dionysus responds, “Mostly at night. Darkness has sacred power” (line 396). This affirmation from Dionysus amplifies the secrecy alluded to in lines 100-103 (rituals took place away from the general populace), making the cult appear even more sinister. Kraemer asserts that from lines 395-398 “we may infer that Euripides knew of Dionysiac rites which were restricted to the initiated, which were celebrated by night, which involved dancing, and which carried with them the suspicion of sexual misconduct.”<sup>28</sup> Even if Euripides' description of cultic rites is inaccurate, he would have still heard rumors about the sinister nature of the Cult of Dionysus, leading him to portray the cult in a negative context in the *Bacchae*.

In the Third Episode Dionysus “escapes” from the custody of Pentheus. Dionysus states in line 519 that “I freed myself, easily, without effort.” The events that Dionysus goes on to describe in lines 521-536 are paramount in fathoming the way in which Dionysus can bend the

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<sup>26</sup> Klauck, p. 109.

<sup>27</sup> Franklin, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Kraemer, p. 60.

perceived existence (turn the perceived world “upside-down”) of a mortal. The lines read as follows:

That is exactly how I humiliated him: when he thought he was binding me, he did not touch or hold me, but was living on empty hopes. He found a bull in the stables, the prison he took me to, and he tied knots around its knees and hooves, panting his rage, his body dripping with sweat, and biting his lips. I was close by, sitting peacefully and watching. It was at this time that Bacchus came, and shook the palace, and made the fire blaze up on his mother's tomb. But when Pentheus saw it, thinking the palace was on fire, he dashed this way and that, ordering his servants to bring him the river Achelous. Every slave was put to work, but toiled for nothing. Pentheus abandoned this task, since I had escaped, and seizing a dark sword he ran into the palace. Then Bromios, I think was just my impression – made a phantom in the courtyard. Pentheus rushed to attack it, and slashed the shimmering air as though he were killing me. That was not the only humiliation to which the Bacchic god subjected him: he shattered the palace to the ground. Everything is wrecked, and my imprisonment is a most bitter sight for him to behold.

Dionysus has not identified himself as the god yet, so he explains the story in the third-person.

Dionysus power to alter the perceptions of Pentheus seems altogether sinister. In this passage, Pentheus is completely removed from reality, which is demonstrated by: his attempt to tie up a bull instead of his prisoner (Dionysus), thinking his palace was on fire, and subsequently demanding that his servants bring him a river. The description of Pentheus' immense struggle in this passage stands in stark contrast to the figure of Dionysus who seems to be enjoying the festivities “close by, sitting peacefully and watching” (line 525). Even though the human character of Dionysus is lounging while enjoying Pentheus' emotional ruin, the audience would have been informed that it was exactly this character who was the culprit of all of the destruction. Euripides' portrayal of Dionysus' control over Pentheus in this passage, instead of seeming awesome, is characterized by the sinister nature in which he uses it. In addition, this passage is just a precursor to the madness that Dionysus causes in later episodes, making the god's power appear dangerous.

After Pentheus abandons the task of capturing the prisoner, and “shattered the palace to the ground” (line 536), he sees Dionysus standing in front of his house. In lines 617-643 the Messenger enters and recounts to Pentheus the indecent actions of the bacchantes. He explains, “

You could see a woman pulling apart a young, full-uddered, bellowing heifer, with her bare hands, and other tearing fully grown cows to pieces. You could see ribs and cloven hoof being hurled up and down.” The bacchant’s deviant acts displayed in this passage are examples of life being turned upside-down (in this case physically) under the influence of Dionysus. These acts could have only been fulfilled under Dionysus’ possession. Following the destruction of the herd, the bacchant’s moved on to the villages where they plundered the inhabitants, and “snatched children from their homes” (line 628).

The messenger continues to describe that the “inhabitants, enraged at being plundered by the bacchant’s, rushed to arms. Then there was a sight extraordinary to behold, my lord; for the men’s spearpoints drew no blood, but the women, hurling thyrsi from their hands, wounded the men and made them turn and run – women overcoming men! Some god must have been there” (lines 632-636). This passage is evidence for the dissolution of gender roles that Euripides describes in the *Bacchae*. Conventionally, men have a more physically apt prowess than women do, but the women are completely overtaking them, which leads the messenger to believe that a god was assisting. Franklin asserts that “hostility to the idea of women defying and defeating men would probably have been shared by most of Euripides’ audience.”<sup>29</sup> In addition, these women are committing crimes against innocent villages, where they plundered resources, and took children. These deviant behaviors are not only sinister in nature, but are further proof of Dionysus’ ability to possess the mind and turn life upside-down. Throughout the history of war the winning army has ransacked the village, but the men performed this duty, with the women being taken as slaves. This passage reverses the gender roles, with the women ransacking the villages, and the men powerless to fight back due to Dionysus’ possession of the bacchant’s.

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<sup>29</sup> Franklin, p. 46.

Following the report of the messenger, Pentheus decides that a counterattack against the bacchantes is necessary, so he orders the messenger to rally the troops. Line 672 foreshadows the possession of Pentheus by Dionysus who states, "What trick is there, if I wish to save you with my arts?" This foreshadows Pentheus' alteration of emotion, which occurs between lines 676-683. In line 676 Pentheus commands, "bring out my armour – and you stop talking!" However, by line 683 Dionysus has convinced him to observe the bacchantes while "sitting in silence under the pine trees." The sudden change of emotion seen in Pentheus supports the concept of life being turned upside-down by Dionysus. This change seems all the more remarkable given the fact that Pentheus is going to his doom. In line 684 where Dionysus states, "But they will track you down, even if you come in secret," yet Pentheus is powerless to resist. This shows the audience that Dionysus has achieved unconditional control of Pentheus, which based on the grotesque nature of Pentheus' death seems remarkably sinister.

At this point Pentheus is unable to resist Dionysus, therefore Dionysus resolves to further shame him. Dionysus commands Pentheus to "clothe your body in a linen dress" (line 688). Pentheus then asks in line 696, "In what clothes? Woman's? I am ashamed!" Dionysus proceeds to convince him by asking in line 697, "Do you no longer want to watch the bacchantes?" Of course Pentheus cannot resist the influence of Dionysus, so he agrees to go to the palace to change into attire suited for a bacchant. In addition, Pentheus must garner the vestments of the bacchantes, which include a headband (line 701), a thyrsus and a dappled fawnskin (line 704). Pentheus seems reserved at first, but decides at the conclusion of the Third Episode (lines 715-716) that "I will go. Either I will go under arms, or I will follow your advice."

The Fourth Episode begins with Pentheus describing the metamorphosis of Dionysus physical body in lines 778-779 where he states, "you look like a bull leading me, and horns seem

to have grown from your head!” This is the first point in the *Bacchae* where Dionysus shows his true form. At the start of the Fourth Episode Pentheus is already dressed like a woman, and his actions are very feminine in nature. This is demonstrated in lines 787-788 where Pentheus responds to Dionysus' offer to put a curl back in place. Pentheus announces, “I must have thrown it out of place when I was dancing as a bacchant inside the palace, shaking my head up and down.” Transvestism (wearing clothes from the opposite gender) had been used in comedies prior to Euripides' composition of the *Bacchae*, but Euripides utilizes it differently in this context.<sup>30</sup> Franklin asserts, “It is common to parody tragedy in comedy, but in *Bacchae* Euripides does something stranger; he takes Aristophanes' comic scene, and in a tragic context he makes it sinister. Pentheus' appearance in women's clothes, his madness and absurd vanity might well arouse laughter; but Dionysus' ambiguous words hint at danger which Pentheus does not see.”<sup>31</sup>

The audience would think it was comical to see Pentheus dressed as a woman, and subsequently observe a less ominous ending, but Euripides amplifies the sinister nature of Dionysus through Pentheus' transvestism before the ultimate destruction of the character. Euripides use of transvestism also demonstrates the dissolution of genders that is commonly associated with the Cult of Dionysus. In earlier passages, it was the dissolution of the roles of women that were associated with the Cult of Dionysus, but these lines demonstrate the overall lack of gender boundaries that are associated with the cult. Another aspect of Euripides' negative portrayal of the cult in the verses is the reversal of states, or life being turned upside-down under the influence of Dionysus. This portrayal is demonstrated in Pentheus' vehement refusal to

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<sup>30</sup> Franklin, p. 50. Franklin asserts, “Five years before this play, the comic playwright Aristophanes poked fun at Euripides in his comedy *Thesmophoriazusaie*. In that play, an actor playing Euripides dresses his relative as a woman to go and spy on the women celebrating a religious festival.”

<sup>31</sup> Franklin, p. 50.

venerate the god up until this point, but after Dionysus exerts his influence over the mind of the character, he is ruined.

The Fourth Episode continues with Dionysus humoring Pentheus on the journey out of Thebes and into the wilderness. The nature of Pentheus' slaughter is foreshadowed in lines 822-825 where Dionysus remarks, "Follow me. I myself will go to guide and protect you, but someone else will bring you back," to which Pentheus then exclaims "My mother!" Dionysus concludes by saying "as an example to all." This last verse in which Dionysus is the speaker conveys the sinister nature of the god, which is enhanced due to the close proximity of the destruction of Pentheus described by the Messenger in the Fifth Episode. Dionysus' inexorable desire for retribution because of Pentheus' hubris makes the god appear human. Humans are known for their lack of consideration before acting, which is dangerous because of the extraordinarily dangerous powers Dionysus has.

The Fifth Episode commences with the Messenger exclaiming, "Pentheus, the son of Echion, is dead" (line 887). Following this dispassionate bulletin, the Messenger, who observed the travesty, proceeds to orate the events that transpired against Pentheus in the wilderness. Dionysus had "took hold of the top branch of a fir, high as heaven, and pulled it down" (lines 916-917) so he could seat Pentheus on top of it. The language that Euripides uses to describe Dionysus' placement of Pentheus is undeniably powerful, and could only have been done by a deity. Therefore, the sinister acts that the bacchants commit following this display of might suggest the dangerous nature of Dionysus' tyranny. Instead of using his authority for good, he is ruining a single mortal that should have been of no consequence to him. Therefore, the power of Dionysus is recognized in Euripides' description of the actions, but the character of Dionysus is

outwardly tyrannical because he has committed all of these atrocities in retribution for one family's hubris.

Dionysus calls the bacchantes away from their inactivity, and possesses them to take vengeance on Pentheus for "making a mockery of you and my rites" (line 927). The bacchantes then take hold of the pine and "tore it out of the ground" (lines 947-948). This display of strength substantiates claims about the power that Dionysus can channel through mortals in the *Bacchae*, but it is not the focus of the actions in the Fifth Episode. After Pentheus falls to the ground he pleads with his mother (Agave) to "Take pity on me, mother, and do not kill me, your son, for my mistakes" (line 955-956). The bacchantes' actions following Pentheus' plea reflect the unconditional hold Dionysus can take over the minds of mortals. Lines 957-967 read as follows:

But she was foaming at the mouth and rolling her eyes in all directions, not in her right mind, possessed by the Bacchic god; and so Pentheus did not move her. Grabbing his left arm below the elbow, she put her foot against the wretched man's ribs and tore his shoulder out of its socket; she did not do it by her own strength, but the god gave power to her hands. Ino was destroying the other side of his body, tearing his flesh, and Autonoe and the whole crowd of bacchantes took hold of him. They all shouted out together, Pentheus screaming as long as he still had breath, and the bacchantes howling in triumph. One of them was carrying a forearm, one a foot with a sandal still on it; his ribs were laid bare by the tearing, and all the women, bloody-handed, were playing catch with the flesh of Pentheus.

Here we see Agave's inability to struggle against the hold of Dionysus, which ultimately compels her to massacre her son. Early in the play it was possible for the audience to sympathize with Dionysus because Pentheus did commit the sin of hubris, and Dionysus should be superior to mortals, thus his anger over the lack of veneration from Thebes. However, Pentheus is cast as the hero in lines 957-959, where he is torn-apart by his mother (Agave) because she was "not in her right mind, possessed by the Bacchic god." Pentheus became the ultimate sacrifice for the hubris of Thebes, which vindicates him, and makes him the city's savior. Without Pentheus' sacrifice there is no telling the psychological upheaval that Dionysus could have caused within

the city of Thebes. Euripides displays Pentheus' redemption in distinct opposition to the loathsome behavior of the bacchants, who were possessed by Dionysus, casting him as the culpable villain of the *Bacchae*. In support of the claims presented above, Kalke argues, "Euripides may be asking his audience to see clearly, like Agave, the reality, the consequences, and the horror of the Dionysiac religion."<sup>32</sup>

This passage incorporates all of Euripides' critical judgments of the Cult of Dionysus, and therefore substantiates the claim that Euripides deliberately presents Dionysiac worship as being deviant, and consequently dangerous. The actions of the bacchants in this passage are unquestionably deviant and sinister due to the atrocious nature by which they massacre Pentheus. The source of Pentheus' death is the bacchants (women) who had already neglected their roles by leaving Thebes (evidence for the dissolution of gender roles and the challenging of social constraints), and who had behaved in such a barbaric way that is not even customarily associated with war. However, it was Dionysus who possessed the women to commit these acts, therefore demonstrating his ability to turn the world upside-down due to his unshakeable influence over the human mind.

In conclusion, the array of evidence presented above provides irrefutable evidence for the hypothesis that Euripides negatively portrays the Cult of Dionysus in the *Bacchae* as being deviant, and therefore dangerous. *Bacchae* was likely seen by substantial numbers of people, which likely influenced the public's perception of the cult. These assertions are echoed in Livy who lived four centuries after the death of Euripides, which demonstrates the cult's unfavorable public perception throughout its existence. The evidence of actual practices of the cult in the *Bacchae* is undeniable due to the extensive nature of Euripides' descriptions. A primary reason

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<sup>32</sup> Kalke, p. 426.

for the deviant actions of the cult is in relation to the tyranny that is seen from Dionysus in this passage. The god has Pentheus dismembered for hubris, which is seen in heroes throughout Greek literature, therefore the graphic nature of Dionysus' revenge on Pentheus makes the act seem exceedingly sinister. The fact that Dionysus had Agave (Pentheus' mother) dismember him provides evidence towards Dionysus' ability to take-over the mind and turn the person's reality upside-down. It is logical that the cult would emulate their patriarch; therefore a sinister patriarch would produce a cult that would be perceived as having sinister rites. Finally, the challenging of social constraints that is demonstrated in the actions of the bacchantes would have caused everyday Greeks to feel threatened by the cult.

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