

THE LIMITS OF DIONYSIAC LIBERATION IN EURIPIDES' S *BACCHAE*

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Abstract

Scholars have frequently observed that Dionysus is a god who breaks down barriers (of gender, class, social norms, et cetera). This is true in Euripides's *Bacchae* to a certain extent, and the play's breakdown of the divide between male/female and Greek/foreign has been well examined in scholarship. However, the limitations of this questioning of boundaries are much less discussed. For instance, while Dionysus frees the women of Thebes from their homes, he does not free slaves during the *Bacchae*. In a play that places considerable emphasis on liberation and freedom, this is a curious omission. The few slave characters in the *Bacchae*, like most slaves in tragedy, support their masters and the status quo. However, the worshipers of Dionysus are also equated with slaves: Pentheus wishes to enslave them, and both the Theban bacchantes and the chorus of Lydian devotees represent a kind of slavery to the god. Far from any Dionysiac destruction of social norms, the identification of the Theban women with slaves actually reveals the limits of the *Bacchae*'s other explorations as well. The women seem doomed by both femaleness and foreignness (the chorus is inherently foreign, the Thebans foreign by association with Dionysus) to be slaves either to Dionysus or to Pentheus. I argue that this is symptomatic of the limitations of Dionysus's breakdown of identities. His questioning of barriers tends to be metaphorical rather than literal, and although he breaks down social identities in the *Bacchae*, he leaves social *hierarchies* securely in place.

Introduction

Dionysus, as scholars frequently declare, is a god that breaks down barriers: gender barriers, cultural barriers, barriers of class and social norms. Euripides's *Bacchae*, which treats the arrival of Dionysus in Thebes, explores these barriers, and in the play Dionysus calls many of them into question as he throws Thebes into chaos for refusing to acknowledge his divinity. Richard Seaford lists some of the dichotomies that Dionysus blurs, a phenomenon that he refers to as “the abolition of differences in the *Bacchae*”:

Dionysus (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, he persuades Pentheus to wear female dress, and turns the women of Thebes into warriors and hunters. He also destroys the difference between human and animal...indeed, in appearing himself as an animal as well as human and god, Dionysus confuses the tripartite division, central to the Greeks' construction of their world, between god, human, and animal.¹

In his *Dionysiac Poetics*, Charles Segal adds that Dionysus “crosses the class division within society, offering his gift of wine as an “equal joy” to both rich and poor, and says that:

What the Dionysus of the tragic performance and the Dionysus of the maenads' ecstasy most fundamentally share is the experience of what lies beyond familiar limits, the limits of civic space, social norms, the familiar boundaries of personality, energy, and perception. As Apollo imposes limits and reinforces boundaries, Dionysus...dissolves them.²

The *Bacchae*, then, engages with a large number of dichotomies familiar to a Greek audience, and Dionysus seems to question or blur a great many of them. This phenomenon has been thoroughly examined, but the limits of this questioning of boundaries have been far less discussed in scholarship. I suggest that the upheaval brought by Dionysus does in fact have very

¹ Seaford 1996, 31.

² Segal 1997, 10-12.

real limits, and an exploration of these limits furthers our understanding of the *Bacchae* and sheds light on aspects of the play that have frequently been ignored.

To be sure, Dionysus calls important aspects of Greek society into question, but some aspects remain unchallenged. For instance, no slaves go running into the mountains to join the maenads in their seemingly liberated revelry. The enslaved characters behave like slaves in any other Greek tragedy, advocating for the status quo and generally avoiding disruptive behavior. Indeed, at first glance, slavery appears to go entirely undiscussed in the *Bacchae*. Why are slaves ignored by a god of liberation who blurs fundamental identities such as gender and ethnicity?

In fact, slavery is present in the *Bacchae* in other ways: Pentheus wishes to enslave the worshippers of Dionysus, and the bacchantes themselves are described as slaves to the god. These representations of slavery, although they are certainly a focus of the play, do not serve to liberate slaves or question the institution of slavery at all. In fact, an examination of the ways in which Dionysiac disruption leaves slavery untouched reveals that the play's questioning of gender and ethnic identities is not as significant as it first seems either. Ultimately, I will argue that these apparent oversights are symptomatic of the fact that Dionysus's breakdown of identities tends to be metaphorical rather than literal: although Dionysus questions social identities in the *Bacchae*, he leaves social *hierarchies* in place.

In the first section of this paper, I examine the ways in which Dionysus throws the differences between male and female into confusion. Driven by Dionysus, the women of Thebes abandon their households and become hunters and warriors who surpass men in physical prowess, even demanding public recognition for these feats. Dionysus himself exhibits feminine characteristics and forces Pentheus to become feminized by the end of the play. In the second section, I turn to the boundary between Greek and foreign. Dionysus calls the distinction

between the two into question by inhabiting both identities simultaneously. In addition, Dionysus's Theban and Asian worshipers—two groups that at first appear distinct—are blended together by his influence. Both gender and foreignness have been discussed in detail by scholars, but my discussion here is intended to provide context for an analysis of the limits of the *Bacchae*'s scope. I have chosen these two examples out of many possible ones because both intersect with slavery and with the social hierarchies that Dionysus leaves in place. Finally, in the third section, I explore the intersections of gender, foreignness, and slavery, especially in relation to the worshipers of Dionysus, and the references to slavery that do appear in the *Bacchae*. As I will argue, far from any Dionysiac destruction of social norms, the identification of the Theban women with foreigners and slaves actually reveals the limitations of the *Bacchae*'s exploration of gender and foreignness as well. The women are doomed by their gender and by foreignness (either inherent foreignness, in the case of the Chorus, or foreignness by association, in the case of the Thebans) to be slaves either to Dionysus or to Pentheus. Ultimately, Dionysus stops short of any changes which might challenge the fundamental structure of Greek society, and characters who are subordinate in Greek society remain so under the influence of Dionysus.

I. Male/Female

Gender plays a central role in the *Bacchae*.³ Much of the plot revolves around the fact that Dionysus has driven the women of Thebes into the mountains, causing them to abandon their households in the process, and Pentheus is struggling to preserve gender norms and undo the disruption caused by their madness. Dionysus causes the maenads to exhibit characteristically 'male' traits by engaging in activities such as hunting, fighting, and leaving the household to

³ E.g.: Buxton 2009, 234. Segal 1997, 158-160. Mills 2006, 13.

worship in the wilderness. Dionysus's own feminine attributes and potentially immoral effect on women are some of the things that Pentheus finds most objectionable about him, yet by the end of the play Dionysus, in order to bring about Pentheus's downfall, has caused Pentheus to dress and act as a woman. In what follows, I offer a brief look at gender in the *Bacchae* in order to provide necessary background for my later arguments in which gender intersects with the question of slavery and hierarchy in the *Bacchae*. This discussion serves as an example of the ways in which Dionysus blurs dichotomies, even those which were deeply ingrained in Greek society.

In the *Bacchae*, Dionysus causes the Theban maenads to abandon their household tasks and the domestic sphere—a disruption to normative activities that Pentheus sees as both peculiar and alarming. Many of Pentheus's actions in the play are driven by this alarm. Indeed, he is against the mere idea of maenads even before they commit violent or dangerous acts. His first lines in the play express his horror at the idea that women might be behaving immorally outside of the household (*oikos*): “I hear of strange mischief in this city, that the women have left our homes in fictitious ecstatic rites...they set up full wine bowls in the middle of their assemblies and sneak off...to tryst in private with men” (215-225).⁴ One of his objections to Dionysus is that “he consorts day and night with the young women, offering them ecstatic rites” (235-238). Many of the actions he takes—imprisoning the Stranger, threatening to enslave the Chorus, and refusing to accept Dionysus as a god—seem in part to be reactions to the overturning of gender norms and the perceived immorality of maenads. He is paranoid that Dionysus (whom he calls “attractive to women,” 453-4) is corrupting the women who ought to be well-behaved wives of Theban men, and possibly conspiring with the women themselves: “this is an immoral trick aimed at women,” he says, and later, “You’ve made a pact, you and they, so that you could keep

⁴ Translations by Kovacs unless otherwise noted.

dancing forever” (486-7, 807). The chastity and integrity of the Theban women is a near-obsessive concern for Pentheus. Yet despite his aversion to the immoral behavior that he sees in maenadism, he remains fascinated by the maenads even after they have demonstrated their fearsome strength and violence, and it is through his desire to see them on Mt Cithaeron that Dionysus eventually ensnares him (810-816).

Although Pentheus reacts excessively to maenadism, his response is understandable: maenadism is not only antithetical to marriage but also to “the whole process by which girls become wives of citizens.”⁵ Young girls were imagined to be “unyoked” or “untamed” before marriage, akin to wild animals. Upon marriage, the young girl took up her proper role in the domestic sphere, properly tamed. In the *Bacchae*, maenads also disrupt this normative trajectory as they leave their home for rituals in the wild, during which they, once again, become like wild animals.⁶ In this way, maenads not only disrupt the institution of marriage but—at least in myth—reject the men of their polis permanently.⁷ Seaford argues that the killing of children that appears so frequently in maenadic myth is a reflection of this deconstruction of the household, as it prevents maenads from returning to normal life and consigns them to exile.⁸ Maenads do not simply defy gender roles: they upend the normative paradigm that restricts women to domesticity and (at least in Pentheus’s eyes) they threaten chaos to the polis with their rites. They represent a fear that women might attempt to change the strict gender divisions of Greek society, in this case by abandoning the household.

Having left the *oikos*, the maenads further upset gender norms by violently triumphing over men. Pentheus’s belief that the maenads are drunk and sexually promiscuous is said to be

⁵ Seaford 1993, 121. Seaford 1996 comments, “Looms in general are antithetical to maenadism,” 191.

⁶ In the *Bacchae*, maenads behave like or are associated with untamed animals (164-166, 443-446, 664-665, 699-704, 734-747, 862-876, 1090). The eating of raw flesh is also animalistic (139-140).

⁷ Seaford 1993, 123.

⁸ Seaford 1993, 123-125.

unfounded, at least in this play, by Teiresias and the messenger (315-318, 683-694). He has far more dramatic causes for concern, however: after being provoked by men who plan to capture them, the maenads tear a herd of cattle to pieces with their bare hands (677-774). They also raid two villages: “They hurled themselves like enemy troops (ὥστε πολέμιοι) upon Hysiae and Erythrae” (750-751), ransacking and plundering in a scene rather reminiscent of the enemy army they are likened to, and when the inhabitants attempt to strike back, weapons have no effect (677-774). This is not the only military language applied to the maenads: Dionysus, when declaring his intentions in Thebes, promises that “if the city of Thebes gets angry and tries to bring the bacchants from the mountain by force of arms, I will meet them in battle at the head of an army of maenads” (ξυνάψω μαινάσι στρατηλατῶν, 50-53). Later in the play, Pentheus responds to the maenads’ military actions in kind, planning to lead an army to massacre them. By moving out of the household, the maenads have entered more masculine roles which involve violence and military action, prompting Pentheus to respond as if to a military threat.

By the end of the play the maenads are also compared to hunters, another role not normally open to women. At the beginning of the play they are more like the hunted than the hunters: in his first speech, Pentheus promises to “hunt” (θηράσομαι) the maenads he has yet to capture out of the mountains (227-228). When the shepherds try to capture Agave, they lie in wait and spring out at the maenads as if hunting prey. However, a reversal of roles occurs almost immediately: Agave calls on the maenads as “my racing hounds (ἽΩ δρομάδες ἐμαὶ κύνες)”, and although she says that they are being hunted by men (θηρώμεθ’), it is the men who are forced to flee for their lives when the maenads turn on them like the hounds to which Agave compares

them (714-735).⁹ With Dionysus present, the rules have changed: instead of fleeing from men, women pursue them. Similarly, upon killing Pentheus, Agave becomes convinced that she is a hunter who has killed a young lion.¹⁰ Agave returns from Cithaeron with Pentheus's head impaled on her thyrsus, anticipating great praise and glory for her skill as a hunter. She declares that she has brought back a victory prize (τᾶριστεῖα) to be hung up on the wall (1238-1240). Segal, when he discusses this scene, says that an ἄριστεῖα suggests “the prize of excellence that the young warrior would bring back to his father as proof of his manhood”—a truly odd word for a woman to use in this context.¹¹ Agave calls on Dionysus as a “glorious victor (καλλίνικον),” (1147) who has helped her in the hunt, declares that the prize of the hunt (γέρας, 1179) is hers, and calls on the chorus to praise her (ἐπαινεῖν, 1192-1197) for her victory.

As one scholar has remarked, “unlike men, who gained honor through public performance of their citizen rights and obligations...women did so by remaining nearly invisible in all realms but the religious.”¹² Pericles's funeral oration displays this ideal clearly by saying that the way for women to gain glory is to be least talked about among men, whether for praise or blame.¹³ Agave defies these expectations when she expresses her desire for Cadmus and Pentheus to see her quarry and praise her success. This goes against the general Athenian desire to keep women in the private sphere and away from public notice. Agave defies gender expectations by demanding public recognition for her hunting prowess in the way that a man might, rather than remaining less visible as would be expected of a woman.

⁹ Seaford observes that the men's flight “reverses what seems to have been a common way of ending the period of autonomous female (maenadic) ritual, namely the pursuit of the maenads from the mountainside by men.” Seaford 1996, 207.

¹⁰ Seaford notes that “hunting is a frequent image for sex. In Greek mythology it is often associated with anomalous sexuality (Adonis, Orion, Kallisto, etc.).” Seaford 1996, 207.

¹¹ Segal 1996, 209.

¹² Kamen 2013, 95.

¹³ Thucydides 2.45.

Just as the Theban maenads transgress traditional gender conventions by taking on unexpected roles, Dionysus distorts gender norms for males as well. Dionysus himself is described as θηλύμορφος (353) for his effeminate appearance, as well as having long hair and white skin (453, 493) which is associated with eastern ἄβροσύνη as well as “with women, and with womanizers.”¹⁴ In this way, gender is foregrounded as a part of the conflict between Dionysus and Pentheus, as Dionysus embodies characteristics associated with the women that Pentheus wants to control. Furthermore, Pentheus, staunch defender of gender norms, ends up dressed as a woman—as Segal puts it, a “crypto-maenad”—as a key part of Dionysus’s victory over him.¹⁵ He fights the idea at first, balking at the feminine dress and long hair that Dionysus offers to adorn him with, saying, “I feel shame” and “I could not bear to wear women’s clothing” (828, 836). Once he succumbs fully to the god’s power, however, he becomes anxious to play his role well, saying with apparent pride, “Do I not have the carriage of Ino or my mother Agave?” (925-926) and fussing over the pleats of his skirt and the proper way to carry his thyrsus (937-942). Seaford notes that “In a reversal of his earlier aggressive treatment of D[ionysus] and his accoutrements in the correspondingly short second episode, P[entheus] outdoes the effeminacy of D[ionysus] that he earlier despised.”¹⁶ Dionysus does not confine his confusion of gender roles only to the masculinization of women; the feminization of Pentheus is central to the climax of the play, and represents Dionysus’s absolute victory over Pentheus and the end of Pentheus’s resistance to the god.

Dionysus throws gender roles into chaos in the *Bacchae*, enabling his followers to engage in masculine activities and using femininity as a weapon against Pentheus. He also bends gender

¹⁴ Seaford 1996, 187. Kurke, “The Politics of ἄβροσύνη in Archaic Greece.” Eastern associations and the concept of *habrosyne* are explored further in the second section of this paper.

¹⁵ Segal 1996, 29.

¹⁶ Seaford 1996, 222.

roles himself, showing feminine characteristics to which Pentheus strongly objects. These changes are dramatic and disruptive in the strictly gender-divided context of Greek society. They prove chaotic and destructive for Thebes, and would have been alarming to an Athenian audience.¹⁷ Alarming though the distortion may be, it is clear that Dionysus dramatically blurs gender norms in the *Bacchae*.

II. Greek/Foreign

Dionysus also challenges the distinction between Greek and foreign in the *Bacchae*. Portrayed as the god of a newly-arrived cult yet clearly a part of established Greek religion, he embodies both identities simultaneously. His worshipers, too, seem to place very little weight on the difference between Greek and foreign, and the Theban and Lydian bacchantes merge together over the course of the play through their shared violence. The difference between foreign and Greek provides another example of an important social dichotomy that is blurred by the presence of Dionysus. It is also relevant here because foreignness is a factor in the maenads' metaphorical enslavement, which shows the limits of their liberation by Dionysus.

Dionysus exhibits many eastern characteristics, and by the end of the play, he forces Pentheus to embody these characteristics as well. The foreignness of Dionysus is one of the first things Pentheus objects to: “they say that a foreigner (ξένος) has arrived from Lydia, a wizard, an enchanter, his blond locks reeking of scent” (233-236). Scented hair is associated with *habrosyne* (a word that is difficult to translate, but is frequently rendered as “Eastern softness” or “luxury” or “decadence”) and as such represents eastern softness and a mark against the stranger

¹⁷ It is important to note that these changes must be regarded as somewhat ambiguous, rather than purely good or bad: they bring destruction to the royal family, but they are also part of the god's worship.

in Pentheus's eyes.¹⁸ Pentheus also comments on Dionysus's pale skin (457), a characteristic associated with women but also individuals from the East.¹⁹ The 'eastern' traits which Pentheus sees in Dionysus are characteristic of the idea of ἀβροσύνη, generally defined as aristocratic Eastern softness and luxury.²⁰ According to Kurke, ἀβροσύνη is an aristocratic lifestyle adopted from Lydia that includes luxurious clothes, scented and styled hair, and "a certain sensuality."²¹ Kurke explains that in the sixth century, "ἀβρός and its derivatives function as positively charged markers of a particular aristocratic style of life" adopted by Greek aristocracy from the East, but in the fifth century, due to changing values and the negative associations of the Persian wars, "ἀβροσύνη [had] become a dirty word."²² As part of these growing negative connotations, ἀβροσύνη became associated with effeminacy, barbarians, and selfish misuse of wealth that did not further the interests of the *polis*.²³ Dionysus, perceived as effeminate, perfumed, and full of eastern softness by Pentheus, certainly conforms to the latter definition. Furthermore, he eventually forces Pentheus to take on some of these same traits just as he forces him to act as a woman. He puts Pentheus into a linen dress (*bussos*) of the sort that tended to be worn by women and Easterners and a headband (μίτρα, 883, 1115), which, in addition to its feminine connotations, is "an emblem" of ἀβροσύνη.²⁴

Pentheus also views Dionysus as the prophet of a disruptive foreign cult, and persecutes him accordingly. Versnel notes that such an accusation would have had contemporary significance for the audience of the *Bacchae*: Athens in the period of Euripides was plagued with anxiety

¹⁸ Kurke 1992, 92-96.

¹⁹ Seaford 1996, 187.

²⁰ Kurke 1992, 91-93.

²¹ Kurke 1992, 96.

²² Kurke 1992, 98-103.

²³ Kurke 1992, 102-103.

²⁴ Kurke 1992, 97. Dodds 1986, 176-177.

about foreign cults, and charges of *asebeia* (crimes against the gods) were often levied against those who introduced or worshiped strange gods, such as Adonis, Sabazios, or Isodaïtes.²⁵ In general, foreign religions carried magical, profiteering, and sexually promiscuous connotations, as well as a damning appeal to women and people of low social status.²⁶ The cult of Dionysus appears to Pentheus to have all of these characteristics. Teiresias is accused of wanting to encourage foreign cults in order to profit from them (255-257). The stranger seems to be a prophet of an exotic, disruptive god, an eastern “wizard and enchanter” (234) with rites involving drunkenness and lustful women.²⁷ These characteristics, all attributes of suspicious foreign cults, make Pentheus’s reactions to the cult understandable. His tone, and the fact that Dionysus is frequently called a δαίμων (a term frequently used to describe foreign gods, according to Versnel) is reminiscent of “the atmosphere and terminology of the *asebeia* trials.”²⁸

Furthermore, Versnel adds that there is a “marked resistance to the novelty of non-traditional gods” as well as a simple dislike for their foreignness. Greek piety, Versnel argues, relied on a lack of change and a reverence for the traditional, which was threatened by the intrusion of foreign cults.²⁹ In this way, Pentheus is completely justified in lashing out against Dionysus, because as far as Pentheus is concerned, Dionysus represents something new, disruptive, and un-Greek. Despite Cadmus’s exhortations to Pentheus to follow tradition by worshiping the god, Pentheus is in fact following tradition by objecting to the worship of Dionysus. Seeing a danger to the law and order of his polis, Pentheus attempts to take actions against the worshipers (enslaving the maenads, executing and humiliating the prophet) that

²⁵ Versnel 1990, 121-127.

²⁶ Versnel 1990, 121.

²⁷ Versnel 1990, 158-160.

²⁸ Versnel 1990, 158.

²⁹ Versnel 1990, 130.

would be perfectly legitimate in the case of an invading foreign cult.³⁰ Dionysus is sufficiently foreign that Pentheus feels justified in persecuting his cult as he would any other foreign religion—and indeed, he has no way of knowing, until the miracles begin, that the cult of Dionysus is any different from the others.

As discussed above, Dionysus is unmistakably foreign in the *Bacchae*. In addition to the foreign traits that he exhibits, he is consistently referred to as a foreigner or a stranger—ξένος.³¹ He brings with him a chorus of Lydian women, and has traveled all over Asia before returning to Greece—a return that apparently only takes place because he heard that Theban women were insulting his mother (1-31). He has been accepted all over Asia before ever turning his attention on Greece, as he boasts that “all barbarians dance in observance of these rites” (482). As we have seen, his worship has the characteristics of foreign cults, and he himself shows signs of ἄβροσύνη. It is not surprising that Pentheus draws the conclusions he does.

Dionysus is also, however, undeniably Greek: as the son of Zeus and Semele, his claim to recognition in Greece is legitimate. Although he is τὸν νεωστὶ δαίμονα (219) to Pentheus, a phrase that indicates a newly arrived foreign god, Cadmus exhorts Pentheus to worship Dionysus so as to avoid upsetting tradition (330-331). Teiresias rebukes Pentheus for his disbelief by explaining that Dionysus is the counterpart to Demeter, bringing drink while she brings wine, and by describing his powers (272-309). This explanation seems to suggest that Dionysus is—paradoxically, since he is clearly shown to be newly arrived and unknown in Thebes—already a secure member of the pantheon. Like Cadmus, Teiresias connects Dionysus to traditions as old as time (201-203).³² Dionysus is portrayed as both an established Greek god and as an

³⁰ Versnel 1990, 162-163.

³¹ *Bacchae* 233, 353, 441, 435, 643, 800, 1047, 1059, 1063, 1068, 1077.

³² According to Dodds, “this language is surprising here: for in the play Dion. is a new god, and it is Pentheus, not Dion., who is entitled to appeal to tradition.” Dodds 1986, 94-5.

undeniably foreign one, to the extent that the dichotomy creates anachronisms and paradoxes. For example, Teiresias speaks “as a man of the fifth century...the glaring anachronism is a warning to the audience that the debate which follows will represent a fifth-century controversy transposed into the mythical past.”³³ Versnel argues that Euripides has emphasized these contradictions in order to cast Pentheus in a no-win scenario, in which his attempt to fight blasphemy leads to offense against the god.³⁴ Although it creates contradictions for the audience and for Pentheus, Dionysus is able to embody foreign and Greek identities simultaneously; there is no boundary between Dionysus the disruptive foreign δαίμων and Dionysus as a part of Greek tradition.

This blurring of Greek and foreign can be seen among Dionysus’s followers as well. The Lydian chorus and the Theban maenads begin as two very distinct groups, but by the end of the play it is clear that their mutual allegiance to Dionysus is more important than differences in ethnicity. It is true that the two groups are physically separate for most of the play, with the Chorus remaining in Thebes to comment on events while the Theban women go to the wilderness of Cithaeron to carry out their rites. Furthermore, the Lydian bacchants appear to be devoted to Dionysus *willingly*, while the Theban maenads have been driven mad by Dionysus and forced to worship him. According to Cole, the Chorus has voluntarily engaged in Dionysiac worship and their madness is “the positive ritual experience of identification with the god,” whereas the madness of the Theban women is “a painful affliction” inflicted as divine punishment for their failure to recognize the god in the first place.³⁵

³³ Dodds 1986, 95.

³⁴ Versnel 1990, 175, 186. According to Versnel, this serves to bring uncomfortable questions to the minds of his audience: how can anyone be certain that the foreign gods they denounce are not gods as legitimate as Dionysus, when the cult of Dionysus shares so many characteristics and is believed to have arrived in Greece as a new religion just as other new cults have?

³⁵ Cole 2007, 330.

As the play begins, the two groups do appear distinct; yet the same words are used to describe the Lydians and the Thebans throughout the play. *Βάκχαι* is used indiscriminately to refer to anyone honoring Dionysus, and both the Thebans and the Chorus are frequently referred to by this term.³⁶ “Maenads” seems to refer to the Theban women most of the time; however, in line 601, the Chorus refers to themselves as maenads as well. Furthermore, the terms are sometimes used together, as when Pentheus is described as wearing the garb of “a maenadic bacchant woman” (γυναικὸς μαινάδος βάκχης, 915). The language of the play indicates very little difference between the two groups of devotees.

Furthermore, any separation between the two groups seems to dissolve by the end of the play, when the Lydians and Thebans appear united by their violence. The choral song that takes place directly before Pentheus’s death is bloodthirsty and vindictive, expressing eagerness for his death at the hands of the Theban maenads: “let justice proceed with sword in hand, stabbing through the throat the man without god, law, or justice, the earthborn son of Echion!” (1011-1016) The Chorus also “dance[s] for joy” at the news of his death (1153-1154). The chorus of bacchants from the East seem linked to the Thebans by the violence which they endorse wholeheartedly. When Agave returns from the mountain, they welcome her: “Receive her into the reveling band of the blissful god!” (1166.) She shows them what she brings—Pentheus’s head—and they respond with “I see it, and I accept you as my fellow reveler” (1169-1172). The murder of Pentheus seems to have brought the two groups—Lydians and Thebans—closer together as fellow worshipers of Dionysus, and as the chorus welcomes Agave, no divide is observed beyond the fact that the Chorus is sane and she is not. The difference between Greek

³⁶ Referring to the Chorus: 83, 152-153, 577, 1168. Referring to the Thebans: 51, 62, 83, 129, 443, 664, 674, 690, 720, 735, 759, 779, 799, 847, 940, 946, 986, 1029, 1089, 1093, 1131, 1160. In this case the difference in frequency seems to be a simple result of the fact that characters in the play speak about the Theban women far more often than they speak about the Chorus.

and foreign bacchants ceases to matter with the triumph of Dionysus.

The Theban and Asian followers of Dionysus blend together by the end of the play as Dionysus elides the boundary between Greek and foreign. Dionysus, too, proves himself to be a legitimate Greek god even as he embodies eastern stereotypes of ἄβροσύνη, inhabiting both identities—the son of Zeus and the foreign *daimon*—simultaneously. To sum up: categories that are important to the organization of Greek society have been called into question in the *Bacchae*. Such a blurring of boundaries is undeniably disruptive. However, as we shall see, the Dionysiac interrogation of barriers finds its limits when it comes to the division between slave and free.

III. Free/Slave

The *Bacchae*, as we have seen, does not hesitate to challenge important parts of societal structure, such as the boundaries between male and female or Greek and foreign. Yet at first glance, Dionysus does not appear to explore the question of slavery as he does these other categories.. No slaves go running into the mountains to join the maenads; Pentheus and Dionysus do not debate about disorderly slaves as they do disorderly women. However, the *Bacchae* contains a number of themes that intersect with slavery, including the two themes we have already explored—Greek/foreign and male/female—and an additional dichotomy, liberation/confinement. By examining the play's thematic treatment of freedom and slavery, we can see that although Dionysus blurs social identity, his breakdown of barriers is almost entirely metaphorical, and disaster results when the same boundaries are blurred in the real world. For women and foreigners as well as slaves, Dionysiac liberation is nearly meaningless because Dionysus leaves hierarchy untouched even when he questions social boundaries.

Before discussing slavery in the *Bacchae*, it is worthwhile to note some broader norms in

the representation of slavery in Greek literature. Because tragedy was generally written by a ruling class with very specific ideologies, slavery was usually not called into question, at least not in the abnormal way that the *Bacchae* addresses gender and foreignness. According to Wrenhaven, “One of the things we learn when comparing the Greek evidence to that from more modern slave societies is the extent to which representations of slaves in the Greek sources are selective and emphasize, above all, the attitudes and concerns of the master class.”³⁷ Rabinowitz concurs, saying that “The slaves in tragedy do not represent a real class but rather respond to the desires and anxieties of the author and his audience.”³⁸ However, if any questioning of slavery were to take place, the *Bacchae*, with its chaotic inversion of norms and customs, seems a prime candidate for such a discussion. As we have seen, male vs female and Greek vs foreign, as well as a number of other dichotomies, are extensively questioned and examined in the *Bacchae*, and captivity/liberation is set up as a similar dichotomy in the rivalry between Dionysus and Pentheus.

Euripides clearly does explore the problem of slavery in plays other than the *Bacchae* (although, as I will discuss below, he generally only engages in these discussions when the slaves are women, foreigners, or both.) According to Wrenhaven, “Out of the three major tragedians, Euripides appears to have been particularly interested in the nature of slavery and his plays are replete with representations of slaves.”³⁹ Synodinou agrees, adding that Euripides finds opportunities to explore slavery where other tragedians do not: he uses the circumstances of war captives to make statements about slavery in general, while other tragedians avoid such broad

³⁷ Wrenhaven 2012, 123.

³⁸ Rabinowitz 1998, 66.

³⁹ Wrenhaven 2012, 115.

statements.⁴⁰ Euripides is not averse to exploring slavery, and does so far more often than other tragedians.

On his opinion of slavery, however, scholars disagree. Wrenhaven believes that Euripides was, in plays that explore slavery, “challenging and tampering with the justification of polarities such as slavery and freedom, nature and convention, Greek and barbarian”—much as he does in the *Bacchae*—and he “invokes sympathy and pathos” for war captives, but that his perspective is “elitist and driven by an ideology which [serves] the master-class.”⁴¹ This is due to the fact that the sympathy he evokes for war captives plays on the idea of the suffering of the nobility brought low, rather than that of ordinary slaves. Synodinou, on the other hand, believes that Euripides does criticize slavery in many of his plays and goes much farther than the other tragedians in doing so. In addition to using war captives to explore the hardships of slavery, Synodinou points out that some of his plays “protest against the concept of slavery by nature” by depicting noble slaves, questioning the inferiority of slaves, and challenging justifications for slavery such as barbarianism or intellectual inferiority.⁴² Synodinou agrees that Euripides does not go so far as to suggest abolitionism, but claims that he does protest slavery “on the grounds of its injustice to the enslaved individual,” because he argues against the concept of slavery by nature and allows his enslaved characters to express their feelings on the experience of slavery.⁴³ In the end, it is impossible to determine the playwright’s feelings on the institution of slavery, although definite knowledge of his thoughts on the matter would certainly help to explain why Dionysus does not go around freeing slaves in the *Bacchae* as he seems to free women. Lacking a way to interpret this absence from the playwright’s point of view, we can only interpret it in terms of what

⁴⁰ Synodinou 1977, 30.

⁴¹ Wrenhaven 2012, 138-139.

⁴² Synodinou 1977, 39, 53, 86, 94-99.

⁴³ Synodinou 1977, 94-109.

Dionysus seems to be doing in the *Bacchae*—a question that is much more complicated than it appears.

Liberation and Confinement in the Bacchae

Freedom and liberation make frequent appearances in the *Bacchae*, both in the repetition of forms of the verb λύειν and in connection to Dionysus's actions and characteristics. Indeed, these themes are so important that one scholar has argued that the “problem of personal freedom” is the entire focus of the play.⁴⁴ Dionysus heavily involves himself in liberation over the course of the play. He frees the women Pentheus has imprisoned: “free of their bonds (λελυμένοι) they skipped off toward the mountain glades...the chains were loosened from their feet of their own accord, and keys opened doors with no mortal hand to turn them” (443-450). He also frees himself when Pentheus attempts to imprison him, tricking Pentheus into putting the ropes onto a bull instead (610-642) and saying, when questioned, “Did I not say, or did you not hear, that someone would free (λύσει) me?” (649.) Versnel notes that Dionysus performs miracles to affirm his divinity, and they fall into two categories: “references to the primordial gifts Dionysus has bestowed on humanity,” and liberation.⁴⁵ Versnel identifies the former category—the primordial gift of wine—with a different kind of liberation, saying that it is “the most powerful instrument that liberates mankind from pains and daily sorrows.”⁴⁶ The chorus rejoices in their physical freedom to run, hunt, and dance in the mountains, and even Teiresias

⁴⁴ Patterson 1991, 171-173. According to Patterson, the play explores the “good and evil” of both “outer” freedom, which he defines in terms of power exerted over other people, and “inner” freedom, freedom of the mind. He classifies the women of the *Bacchae* as symbols of the uncontrolled, nonrational parts of the mind, set free by Dionysus even as he has liberated them physically from their place in Theban society. He argues that the freedom of the maenads is too extensive and turns loose the dark inner forces that lead to Pentheus's death. From Patterson's perspective, the play is an exploration of both the necessity and the danger of personal freedom.

⁴⁵ Versnel 1990, 166-167.

⁴⁶ Versnel 1990, 167.

and Cadmus seem freed from some of the cares of old age when they prepare to worship Dionysus. Versnel adds that “Nothing can be so firmly bound, neither by illness, nor by wrath or any fortune, that cannot be released by Dionysus,” and this certainly seems to be the case in the *Bacchae*.⁴⁷ Dionysus repeatedly destroys any bonds that Pentheus tries to place on himself and his followers—indeed, this destruction of fetters is one of the main ways that he proves himself as a god to ‘everyman’ characters like the messenger.

This emphasis on liberation and freedom in connection with Dionysus is made stronger by the fact that Pentheus embodies the opposite: he exhibits an almost obsessive fascination with binding, restraining, and imprisoning the followers of Dionysus, and the idea of captivity or imprisonment comes up frequently. Given the prevalence of these two opposing themes, the play sets up free/unfree as a dichotomy similar to the other dichotomies that Dionysus engages with, and that I discussed above. In the beginning of the play Pentheus says that he is keeping all of the bacchantes he has been able to catch imprisoned, “their hands bound” (δεσμίους χέρας, 226) in a πανδήμοισι στέγαις (a ‘common prison,’ 227). He promises to catch them “in nets of iron” (σιδηραῖς ἄρκυσιν, 231), and tells Teiresias that if he did not respect Teiresias’s age, Teiresias too would be sitting bound (δέσμιος, 259) with the bacchantes for introducing such rites. Arriving with the Stranger in captivity, Pentheus’s servant tells him that the Stranger submitted to binding without a fight, “telling me with a laugh to tie him up (δεῖν, 439) and lead him away.” The servant also makes sure to say that the bacchantes imprisoned by Pentheus have gone free—the ones that Pentheus had “restrained, arresting and chaining them up in the public prison” (κἀδησας ἐν δεσμοῖσι πανδήμου στέγης, 444). Pentheus responds by saying that the Stranger is “in the net” (ἐν ἄρκυσιν, 451) and cannot escape, and after arguing with the Stranger for some

⁴⁷ Versnel 1990, 138.

time, says that he will keep the Stranger imprisoned inside (εἰρκταῖσί τ' ἔνδον, 497) and orders him to be “shut up” (καθεῖρατ', 509) near the horses.

Indoor imprisonment seems to be especially emphasized, creating a contrast between what Pentheus wants (the bacchants locked away inside, tending their looms and staying within the *oikos*) and what Dionysus wants (the bacchants free to worship outdoors in the mountains). The chorus also uses language of imprisonment, expressing fear of Pentheus; similar language appears again in the earthquake scene in which Dionysus frees the imprisoned maenads and explains how he escaped.⁴⁸ Finally, Pentheus orders that the gates around the city be shut, presumably so that the maenads cannot escape (653); this is his last serious attempt at confining anybody, and once again represents an attempt to close in the women that Dionysus would like to send into the wilderness. Even much later, when he is dressed as a woman and fully under Dionysus's power, he internalizes Dionysus's reassurances that the maenads are behaving chastely with this image: “I imagine that like birds caught in bushes they are held fast (ἔχουσθαι) in the sweet enclosures (φιλότοις ἔρκεσιν) of their beds” (957-8). The only way that Pentheus is able to imagine the bacchants as chaste is to imagine them *held fast* and *enclosed*; in his mind they must be restrained by something.

In keeping with this obsessive desire to confine bacchants, Pentheus declares his intent to sell the Asian bacchants, the chorus, or “keep them as slaves (δμωίδας) to tend my looms” (511-514). This is in keeping with his concern with imprisoning and binding, as seen above.

According to Dodds, “the proposal to enslave them is drastic, and could hardly be put in the

⁴⁸ The chorus expresses fear that Pentheus will “bind me in the knotted ropes” (ἔμ' ἐν βρόχοισι τὰν τοῦ Βρομίου τάχα ξυνάψει, 545-546); Dionysus calls an earthquake to free the maenads who have been imprisoned, and first the chorus, then Pentheus, asks how he escaped being bound, using more language of ropes and binding. Dionysus explains that Pentheus actually tied up a bull, again in similar language (616-626). For further examples see 644-643, 792-793.

mouth of a character intended to be sympathetic.”⁴⁹ It does, however, serve the function—essential, in Pentheus’s mind—of returning women to the domestic sphere which they have abandoned, forcing them back into a female role in the household. Captivity and restraint, then, play as large a role in the *Bacchae* as does liberation; Pentheus and his desire to imprison are set in opposition to the liberation of Dionysus, creating a dichotomy much like Greek/foreign or male/female.

Slaves in the Bacchae

If liberation/confinement is a dichotomy similar to Greek/foreign and male/female, one might expect to see Dionysus set about freeing the slaves of Thebes as he does the women of Thebes, but no such liberation takes place. Although Dionysus engages with and disrupts real-world expressions of other dichotomies—exhibiting Eastern ἀβροσύνη, driving women out of the household, and liberating the foreign women that Pentheus tries to enslave—he does not disrupt institutional slavery. The absence of any foregrounding of these themes in the *Bacchae* is curiously illustrated by Wole Soyinka’s 1974 play, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, a modern retelling that places slavery into the central position occupied by gender in Euripides’s tragedy.

Soyinka’s play brings the avoidance of liberation for slaves in Euripides’s play into more prominent relief. Soyinka’s *Bacchae* alters a number of important elements of Euripides’s play, but it maintains the theme of liberation and magnifies it into the play’s main focus. Instead of an all-female chorus, there is a slave chorus; we see slaves mingling with the foreign women and Theban maenads, and contributing to the Dionysiac unrest that gains the attention of the

⁴⁹ Dodds 1986, 141-142.

authorities.⁵⁰ Although the plot is very similar to Euripides's play, Soyinka adds scenes to develop the tensions between slaves and their masters. A slave calls on Dionysus as "free spirit, soul of liberty, seed of the new order," identifying a new era in which slaves will rise up.⁵¹ Pentheus, unsurprisingly, retains his connection to imprisonment and confinement: "You are a man of chains. You love chains. Have you uttered one phrase today that was not hyphenated by chains?" In addition, a slave chorus calls for "Justice! Restitution! O Spirit of Equity," in rebellious fervor that would surely be unthinkable to a Greek playwright.⁵² The idea of women's liberation remains, but it is accompanied by themes of slaves rising up. In this way, Soyinka seems to equate slavery with the other identities explored by Euripides's play. The plethora of slave characters in Soyinka's *Bacchae* makes one wonder: where are the slaves in Euripides's *Bacchae*, and why are they not connected to a god who promises liberation?

There are a few slaves in the *Bacchae*, but they appear mainly as messengers and deliverers of information, completely separate from the action, and they tend to support moderation and wisdom rather than any expression of Dionysiac liberation. The servant who brings the Stranger to Pentheus is identified as a θεράπων and therefore possibly a slave, but his main contribution is to describe some of Dionysus's miracles and to express shame for having to capture the Stranger, who does not resist or show fear (434-450). In addition, the second messenger identifies himself explicitly as a slave, saying that he laments the misfortune of the royal household although he is a δοῦλος (1027).⁵³ Commentators agree that his remarks about slaves being affected by their masters' fortunes (1028) are an interpolation from *Medea*, but he

⁵⁰ Soyinka 1974.

⁵¹ Soyinka 1974, 47.

⁵² Soyinka 1974, 65-82.

⁵³ Wrenhaven 2012, 10-12. Wrenhaven identifies this as "the most common and oldest word found in classical sources for 'slave'." She also notes that in Classical sources it is "the only word for 'slave' which appears as the semantic opposite to *eleutheros*."

nevertheless seems to support the royal house in his conversation with the Chorus by showing dismay at the disaster that has befallen it (1024-1027).⁵⁴ Burdened with the tale of Pentheus's death, he pauses to defend the status quo when the bacchants rejoice at the news, demanding to know if they take pleasure in his master's (δεσπότηις) misfortunes (1031-1033). The text here is plagued with problems, but it seems that in the original text the messenger attempted to reassert gender norms as well, asking if there are no men in Thebes (1032-1037). After telling his tragic story, he acts as the voice of common wisdom, managing to advocate for obeying Dionysus while also decrying excess: "the best thing of all is to practice moderation (τὸ σωφρονεῖν) and worship the gods" (1150-1152). In short, he acts the part of the contented slave that so frequently appears in tragedy.⁵⁵

This slave, then, is not at all enchanted by ideas of Dionysiac liberation, but instead advocates for the status quo and supports the royal household. Indeed, he answers one of the main questions of the play—"What is wisdom?"—in saying that moderation and respect for the gods are the wisest course of action.⁵⁶ He declares the greatness of Dionysus, recounting miracles and urging worship, but honors the god only as a deity in general, not for any specifically Dionysiac characteristics. He seems to be separated entirely from the orgy of change and disruption that Dionysus has brought on Thebes, and instead conforms to the role of the 'good' slave so common in tragedy, supporting his masters and advocating the worship of Dionysus only to the extent that it will stave off the god's wrath. It does not seem to occur to him that Dionysus might bring the possibility of freedom for slaves, and there is no reason why it should: in this play, at least, Dionysus never does anything of the kind.

⁵⁴ Dodds 1986, 206-207. Seaford 1996, 232.

⁵⁵ E.g. Euripides *Ion*.

⁵⁶ Dodds 1986, 219.

In sum, while highlighting the theme of liberation versus confinement, Dionysus—and by extension Euripides—largely ignores real slaves in the *Bacchae*. The theme of slavery is still explored, however, through Dionysus's female worshipers, who are equated in many ways with foreign slaves. An examination of the enslavement of these women—which represents a confluence of femaleness, foreignness, and slavery—reveals the limits of Dionysiac liberation in the *Bacchae* and shows that altered identities do not necessarily represent an altered hierarchy.

Women as Slaves

Pentheus's desire to imprison the bacchantes reflects a common tendency in Greek literature: tragedians, including Euripides in many of his other plays, frequently show *women* enslaved by victorious armies, rather than men. Greek men had complex anxieties around the practice of enslaving prisoners of war, because in a state that frequently went to war, there was no guarantee that Greeks would not share a similar fate.⁵⁷ They often coped with this idea by ensuring some distance between themselves and foreign captives portrayed in literature: according to Rabinowitz, in *Trojan Women*, "Euripides allays some of the cultural anxieties of the citizen man...by rendering the newly created slaves specifically female."⁵⁸ The same is true in the *Hecuba* and the *Andromache*, where Euripides "emphasizes the femininity of the slave women."⁵⁹ This suggests, according to Rabinowitz, that Greek men "will not become slaves, because they are not women."⁶⁰ Portraying slaves as women, barbarians (see below), or both helps to maintain distance between Greek men and the possibility of slavery. The Greeks considered women distinct from men; according to Aristotle, "the male is by nature superior, the

⁵⁷ Wrenhaven 2012, 128.

⁵⁸ Rabinowitz 1998, 61.

⁵⁹ Rabinowitz 1998, 59.

⁶⁰ Rabinowitz 1998, 59.

female inferior; and the one rules, the other is ruled” (*Politics* 1254b12-15).⁶¹ They were conceived as intellectually lesser, and physically imperfect; their perceived lack of rationality “justified the subordination of free women.”⁶² This would have made the enslavement of women far easier to handle for Greek men concerned about slavery; women were sufficiently inferior by nature to men that their enslavement was much more palatable. Thus, again, Pentheus’s desire to enslave the maenads is not entirely unexpected, as femaleness can serve as a justification for slavery in literature. We have already seen that gender roles have been questioned in this play, with Pentheus subordinated in female dress and maenads inhabiting masculine roles as hunters in the wilderness. It seems strange that Dionysus removes women from household tasks and sends them into the mountains but never indicates any interest in the slaves who perform similar tasks.⁶³ As with the case of foreigners, he shows interest in a group frequently *associated* with slaves, but shows no interest in slaves themselves.

Real women in Greek society were also similar to slaves in a number of ways. Women in Athenian society, like slaves who were confined to the *oikos*, were kept out of public life as much as possible.⁶⁴ As mentioned above, society as depicted in Greek literature represents an ideal rather than a reality, and women by necessity did leave the household for a number of reasons, from simple errand-running to religious duties; however, it is safe to say that participation in public life, especially for women who were full middle-class or upper-class citizens, was severely restricted.⁶⁵ They were conceived as dependents in Greek law “under the supervision of a *kurios*,” a male relative or husband who acted as a guardian. *Kurioi* exerted

⁶¹ Demand 1998, 70.

⁶² Demand 1998, 70-71.

⁶³ It is unclear whether “all the women there were” (35-36) includes slave women, but there is no indication of slaves being involved with the maenads, and Pentheus seems mainly concerned with the moral and societal problem of wives abandoning their marriages, not with a loss of labor. (352-4.)

⁶⁴ Kamen 2013, 87-98.

⁶⁵ Kamen 2013, 87-98. Patterson 1991, 107, 108-109.

control over any property that women might acquire, and women could only appear in court represented by a *kurios*.⁶⁶ Slaves, even more so than women, were treated as the legal equivalents of minors and lacked basic rights and protections.⁶⁷ Household tasks such as the ones that Pentheus struggles to force the maenads into were the province of women and slaves.⁶⁸ According to Patterson, “within the household, slaves would have been the main adult company of nearly all such women, and one can easily guess at the implications of this close association.”⁶⁹ The two groups share many traits, and although Pentheus may be “tyrannical” to suggest enslaving the women to correct their behavior, it is clearly a logical connection for him to make. This is true especially because these particular women are foreign as well, either by nature in the case of the Chorus or, in the case of the Thebans, by association with Dionysus and the breakdown of the Greek/foreign boundary.

Foreigners as Slaves

Justifications for slavery also relied on the non-Greek nature of slaves. Greeks were “averse to the enslavement of their fellow Greeks,” and preferred to enslave barbarians.⁷⁰ In fact, according to Rabinowitz, enslaved prisoners of war might not necessarily be called slaves because—reflecting again the anxiety of Greek men around slavery—“to do so would mean acknowledging that men of the highest rank could be sold into slavery.”⁷¹ Instead, the concept of “natural slavery” served to justify the institution and deny the possibility of enslavement for well-off Greeks, and although the division was not so clear in reality, slaves were ideologically

⁶⁶ Kamen 2013, 87-91.

⁶⁷ Kamen 2013, 8-19.

⁶⁸ Kamen 2013, 89-90.

⁶⁹ Patterson 1991, 107.

⁷⁰ Kamen 2013, 8.

⁷¹ Rabinowitz 1998, 58.

“constructed as foreign or barbarian in order to protect the Greek sense of self as free and independent.”⁷² They were also held to be less intelligent and to lack a “rational soul,” making them—like women—inherently inferior.⁷³

The Women of Thebes as Foreign Slaves

I suggest that the female devotees of Dionysus in the *Bacchae*, both Asian and Theban, represent a confluence of femaleness and foreignness that provokes Pentheus’s threats of enslavement and even leads to the Theban women being viewed as foreigners rather than Greeks. Both foreigners and women are depicted as slaves in Greek literature, as we have seen, to maintain a distance between Greek men and the possibility of slavery; both are conceived as naturally inferior. When Pentheus declares that he will sell “these women you have led to be accomplices in mischief” (511-513) or keep them as slaves, he reflects this tendency to equate femaleness and foreignness with slavery.⁷⁴ The term he uses—*δμωίδα* (514)—is a poetic word that specifically means slaves captured in war. I suggest that he views the bacchants—both Lydian and Theban—as foreign enemies just as he views Dionysus as a disruptive foreign prophet. As previously mentioned, the foreign bacchants and the Theban maenads are frequently equated with each other in language and in behavior. Pentheus threatens to enslave “these women you have led to be accomplices,” which seems to indicate the Theban bacchants as well as the chorus, and he does in fact imprison some of the Theban women (226-227, 443-444). Furthermore, it is the Theban women whose blood he threatens to shed upon hearing of their violent rampage. He declares, “the violence of these bacchants now blazes at our doors like a fire,” and continues:

⁷² Rabinowitz 1998, 58.

⁷³ Demand 1998, 71.

⁷⁴ Translation is my own here.

“order a gathering of all hoplites, all riders of swift-footed horses, brandishers of light shields and those whose hands make the bowstring sing: we are going to war with the bacchants!” (778-785.) These lines suggest that Pentheus perceives the Theban women as an *outside* threat that “blazes at our doors,” a military problem rather than a domestic one. After all, the Theban women worship a foreign god with disruptive rites that seem barbaric, are equated with the Lydian chorus, and have been spending their time in the wilderness outside the polis. The behavior of the Theban maenads, then, has made them foreign in Pentheus’s eyes.

Dionysus and Slavery

Dionysus liberates his devotees from imprisonment and protects them from weapons and Pentheus’s attempts at a military response, appearing to fulfill his role as liberator, but the liberation of the maenads is not as freeing as it seems. Although he prevents Pentheus from enslaving the bacchants, Dionysus does not seem to be truly *liberating* anyone: in fact, his followers are comparable to slaves themselves. After a fruitless conversation with Pentheus at the beginning of the play, Teiresias tells Cadmus that they must be slaves to the god (δουλεντέον, 366). The chorus embodies this metaphorical enslavement to the god in both their words and their deeds. Their ready submission to the will of Dionysus is contrasted with Pentheus’s resistance. The Chorus also praises “sweet toil” and joyful weariness in the god’s service (66-67), and later adds that the man is blessed who serves Dionysus (Διόνυσον θεραπεύει, 82). On *θεράπων* and its variations, Pleket notes that “when applied to free persons the context always seems to be either the cult of Asclepius or the worship of oriental gods,” meaning the use of *θεραπεύω* maintains Dionysus’s ties to the east as well.⁷⁵ The Chorus also

⁷⁵ Pleket 1981, 159.

refer to themselves as belonging to Dionysus in their exclamations against Pentheus's wrath (545-546). Seaford interprets this line as implying slavery, noting that "it was illegal in Athenian law to maltreat another's slave."⁷⁶

Service to the god here becomes extremely literal, especially for the women of Thebes, who unlike the Chorus have been forced to worship Dionysus.⁷⁷ He has separated them from their household duties and placed them into roles that would not usually be open to women (hunters, warriors, 'wild women' in the mountains) but since they still have no control over their lives and certainly have less control over their minds, they are arguably no freer than they were before. And although Dionysus associates with the less respected aspect of the other dichotomies explored in the play—god/human, male/female, Greek/foreign—he is no slave and remains very much the master. The language by which the chorus refers to Dionysus also often coincides with words used for Pentheus by Pentheus's servants: ἄναξ and δεσπότης (referring to Dionysus: 582, 602, 1192; referring to Pentheus: 670, 769, 1033, 1095). Dionysus blurs social boundaries and frees his worshipers from norms and expectations, but he neither blurs nor questions hierarchy; as a god, he remains fundamentally in charge in all cases. Euripides's Dionysus proves to be almost the opposite of Soyinka's: he liberates his female worshipers from social boundaries, but they are not free at all.

The examination I have offered, then, shows the fundamental limits of Dionysiac liberation: Dionysus demands worship from everyone equally and blurs social *identities*, but shows very little interest in questioning social hierarchy. Dionysus does indeed challenge social identity. The maenads, for instance, are made more similar to men than women by the activities (hunting, fighting, leaving the household) that they undertake in their madness. Pentheus

⁷⁶ Seaford 1996, 193.

⁷⁷ For more on followers of Dionysus as slaves, see Griffith 2002.

undergoes the opposite transformation, becoming feminized by the influence of the god. What is more, as we have seen, ethnic identity is a concern of the play. Dionysus is established simultaneously as a newly-arrived foreign god and an existing part of the pantheon and the two groups of worshipers, Greek and foreign, are united in many ways. The god himself embodies the disadvantaged group in the dichotomies of identity that the play explores—effeminate, a foreigner with an entourage of foreign women, a god who appears as human and even as an animal.

However, despite this blurring of identities, hierarchies remain in place. True liberation of slaves seems to be beyond the scope of the *Bacchae*, as does any true liberation of women or separation of foreigners from their association with slavery. As mentioned above, Dionysus is frequently referred to by terms—ἄναξ and δεσπότης—that are also used by Pentheus's servants to address Pentheus, and his followers are reminiscent of slaves themselves. Despite the blurring of social identities, hierarchies of power remain in place. Maenads gain power to some extent by becoming more like men, and Pentheus loses power—and dies—by becoming more like a woman.⁷⁸ When the women of Thebes become foreigners by association with Dionysus, they also become slaves in Pentheus's eyes because, as we have seen, women and foreigners are both associated with slaves. Dionysus challenges Pentheus's obsession with confinement and restraint by repeatedly liberating himself and his worshipers, but the liberation in question only makes the women of Thebes more free to worship him; it does not make them *free* in any sense of the word. His worshipers are associated with images and language of freedom, but Dionysus

⁷⁸ It is interesting to note that in addition to the hierarchical division that clearly remains in place, there are also significant linguistic divisions between the genders as well. A prominent example is the use of the word σωφροσύνη. In many ways, the *Bacchae* explores the limitations of this virtue and the dangers of embodying it only in an incomplete form. Relevant here is its differing use for men and women: for men it is a complex expression of moderation and sensibility (as opposed to pointless cleverness, which Pentheus and Dionysus frequently accuse each other of) which arguably no one in the play exhibits fully. For women it seems to mainly mean chastity and the embodiment of wifely virtues. See Rademaker 2005 and North 1966.

has in fact forced the Theban maenads to leave their houses and honor him, meaning that their freedom from the household comes only as a result of slavery to the god. The Dionysus of the *Bacchae* breaks down *identities*, but is content to leave hierarchy where it stands so long as he is worshiped by everyone.

Conclusion: The Limits of Dionysiac Liberation

So what, then, does the liberation and boundary-breaking of Dionysus accomplish, beyond the ruin of the royal family?⁷⁹ At the end of the play, Pentheus is dead. Agave has been brought back to her sanity (one assumes that the departure of the god means that the rest of the Theban women will awaken from their madness as well) only to be sent into exile with her sisters.

Cadmus is doomed with a bizarre prophecy that he will lead a barbarian army against Greece and be transformed into a snake (1330-1362). According to Segal, “equilibrium is not restored; we are left with total disorientation: exile, suffering meted out far beyond the offense, cruel and distant gods who liberate men and women from the constraints of their ordinary consciousness and familiar values, but at the price of releasing also their most destructive impulses.”⁸⁰ This is at least true of the royal family, although the state of the polis itself following this crisis is a matter of disagreement; Seaford emphasizes that the polis benefits from the introduction of Dionysiac cult.⁸¹ It is safe to say, however, that the boundaries which were questioned have

⁷⁹ And possibly the rest of Thebes as well, depending on interpretation—see below.

⁸⁰ Segal 1997, 213.

⁸¹ Seaford, 1996, 50-51. For further articulation of the disagreement on this point between Segal and Seaford, see their discussion in *BMCR*. Seaford sees the *Bacchae* as an aetiological myth for the Bacchic cult, a play steeped in ritual that ends with the establishment of the cult. For him, the *Bacchae* is part of a pattern in drama “in which suffering is related to the necessity of performing collective ritual.” He believes that Pentheus is acting in opposition to the will of the polis, and that it is only the royal family, not Thebes, that is destroyed at the end of the play. Segal, on the other hand, believes that the *Bacchae* “is engaged in more complex negotiations with these patterns, using them, to be sure, but not always in a direct one-to-one correspondence, and not necessarily simply affirming them or restamping them onto its narrative material.” He says that tragedies examine traditions and values, often by questioning them, and cannot be read as part of a monolithic pattern. For Segal, the *Bacchae* is not

been in some sense reestablished—after the damage is already irreversible. At the very last, Pentheus tears the headdress off his head so that Agave will recognize him, exclaiming, “it’s me, mother, Pentheus, the son you bore in Echion’s house!” (1115-1119.) He resists the alteration of his identity, but only after it is too late. Agave is brought back to sanity by Cadmus, her father, who recalls her by asking her to recount her marriage and her son—the concerns of women, rather than hunters (1273-1276). Some amount of order is brought back to a cast of characters destroyed by Dionysiac disorder, but only in time to make the situation more painful; Cadmus wonders if he should call Agave back from her madness at all, saying, “if you remain throughout in your present state, though you will not be truly happy, you will at least not be thought miserable” (1259-1262). The Lydian Chorus seems to be the only group for which Dionysiac liberation and boundary-breaking are both pleasant and advantageous; for everyone else, they are instruments of destruction. Dionysus repeatedly ‘liberates’ the Theban women from Pentheus’s attempts to imprison and confine them, but their liberation from the household in the first place is in fact part of a punishment, visited on Thebes for failing to worship Dionysus. Agave reacts appropriately to the ‘liberation’ she has experienced when she declares at the end of the play that she will never involve herself in Dionysiac worship again (1381-1387).

At first glance slavery appears to lack any meaningful presence in the *Bacchae*; however, the intersection of slavery with gender and foreignness, as seen in the female devotees of Dionysus, shows that Dionysiac blurring of boundaries has significant limitations. Specifically, when Dionysus alters identities, they remain attached to the existing hierarchy: thus, when Pentheus becomes more like a woman, he loses power, and when the Theban women become more like foreigners, who are often seen as slaves or enemies, they become slaves and enemies

an affirmation of the cult but an exploration of the suffering and disorder brought by the coming of Dionysus. In Segal’s reading, Pentheus’s destruction represents the destruction of Thebes.

to Thebes as well. Women in the *Bacchae* become masculine and men become feminine, but maleness still signifies strength while femaleness signifies weakness. The boundary between Greek and foreign blurs in Dionysus's female followers, but Pentheus equates the Theban women with foreign enemies and slaves as a result. Only Dionysus, as a god, is able to embody femaleness and foreignness without suffering for it. For the play's human characters, however, association with disadvantaged groups such as women or barbarians means a loss of power, because Dionysus has not altered the hierarchy in causing the characters to take on less privileged identities. Dionysiac liberation has its limits, even in a play as unusual as the *Bacchae*.

Since the *Bacchae* disrupts so many fundamental elements of Greek society, the elements which it refuses to disrupt are telling. Many scholars have observed that the Dionysiac breakdown of boundaries is a fundamental part of the *Bacchae*, but the limits of that breakdown are at least as important to our understanding of the play. Hierarchy is so fundamental in the *Bacchae* that the god of broken barriers and changed identities does not alter it even when he alters other important foundations of society. Euripides can imagine a blurring of the boundary between Greek and foreign, for example, but only if foreignness still results in a lessening of status for the characters who were formerly Greek. Slavery, then, is not explored because slavery is tied too closely to the social hierarchy. The *Bacchae* may break down barriers, but the limitations of that breakdown are indicative of the limitations of the elite Greek male imagination. These aspects of the play have often been ignored, but they alter our understanding of the *Bacchae* and shed light on the nature of Greek society.

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