

DIONYSIAN PUNISHMENT:

A Study of Identity, Oppression, and Liberation in Euripides' Bacchae

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The Dionysus of Euripides' *Bacchae* is a terrifying and strikingly subversive character. Upon first glance he seems to be rejecting the patriarchy and gender binary of Ancient Greece, but this intentional choice to make his provocative appearance the catalyst for revenge suggests the opposite. Throughout the play Dionysus exploits misogyny and xenophobia for his own agenda instead of deconstructing traditional systems of power. Dionysus transforms each character into a non-normative¹ identity to enact his revenge, and while they are all effected differently, their transformations occur when they dress as maenads. In this thesis I will examine how the appearance of Dionysus and the role the maenadic costume plays as tools for revenge and alienation. I will do this in order to explain how the god uses marginalized identities to punish those around him rather than liberate them.

The term maenad itself can be translated to “frenzied woman” as opposed to bacchae meaning a female follower of Dionysus. There is an onstage chorus that is referred to as the bacchae consisting of women from Lydia and there is also an offstage group of Theban women referred to as maenads. Those these terms are similar they are used to distinguish different characters. The term maenad also puts particular emphasis on the crazed emotions that come with the Dionysian rituals. The maenadic costume is a ceremonial outfit used in the cult of Dionysus, and the garments involved include a spotted fawnskin (696)², a thyrsus³, a garland atop the head (702), snake shaped jewelry⁴ (698), and loose flowing hair (695). The gendered aspect of the costume is a bit ambiguous but within *Bacchae* it has a subversive effect on gender. Dionysus says to Pentheus: “Be seen by me wearing your costume of a woman, a maenad, a

¹ Non-normative- any identity that is marginalized in society by gender, race,, age, or disability.

² Euripides. *Bacchae*. Translated by Esposito, Steven.

³*Thyrsus*- A ritual staff topped with ivy.

⁴ Or live snakes in this case.

bacchant” (915) but it is important to clarify that these words can’t always be used interchangeably. A woman may not necessarily be a maenad just as a maenad may not necessarily be a woman, but there is an undeniable connection between maenadism and femininity. Although we see men participating in the bacchic rituals when Tiresias and Cadmus dress themselves like maenads, they are not the target of misogyny but ageism. Their costumes don’t seem to be inherently feminine but when Pentheus dresses as a maenad later he does so because the related rituals are supposedly forbidden to men to observe (823). Pentheus refers to the Theban maenads’ celebration of Dionysus as a “women’s festival” (261) as an excuse to justify using force to police it. Therefore, although the maenadic costume is not explicitly female, it is the catalyst for most of the gender subversion in the play. Beyond gender, taking on the identity of a maenad causes lines to blur between age, culture, and even species⁵. In *Bacchae* Dionysus uses maenadism as a tool for punishment and the wearing the outfit signifies that one is under the control of the god.

Dionysus

Dionysus is not only dressed as a maenad but also as an effeminate foreigner from the east. When he is first introduced, he says “I have changed my appearance to a mortal one and transformed my shape into the nature of a man” (53-54) referring to his chosen body being anatomically male. He is addressed as a man and yet Pentheus refers to him as “effeminate” (353). This makes it a bit unclear if it is Dionysus’ body that is feminine or his outfit and mannerisms. He is described as having long flowing hair, feminine white skin, and talks to his female followers in an intimate and friendly way, calling them “comrades in rest, companions of the road” (57). Dionysus is also holding an ivy topped thyrsus (495) and wearing a maenadic

⁵ Initiation into religious cults in 5th century Greece often included transvestitism to symbolize the death of the individual identity and the rebirth as part of a religious faction.

costume just as the chorus of bacchae are. It seems that most of Dionysus' effeminacy comes from his Lydian style of dress and acting. This is evident when Pentheus says, "those long side curls of yours show for sure you're no wrestler rippling down your cheeks, infected with desire" (455-456). This type of long and flowing male haircut is related to *Habrosyne*, an eastern lifestyle of effeminate luxury that is distinguished by long hair, elaborate fashion, and a subtle eroticism⁶. Dionysus shares this Lydian background with the bacchic chorus. This does not seem to be a socially acceptable way for a Greek youth to dress as Pentheus comments on the evident strangeness of Dionysus' presentation frequently throughout the play. For example, when Pentheus begins to threaten Dionysus he says, "first I'll cut off those luxurious curls of yours" (493), expressing that he finds Dionysus' feminine features to be the most offensive. Though Dionysus is not performing in an explicitly masculine or feminine way, this ambiguity makes him extremely difficult to categorize in the understood gender binary of Greek society.

Beyond his male mortal form, Dionysus' immortality further complicates his relationship with gender. First, because of his divine status he is not so much a man as he is an entity disguised as a man. He also does not conform to the same gendered rules as mortals. Gods frequently get away with subversive behavior in a way that humans cannot, which is why Dionysus is able to make it to the end of the play unscathed. Another example of this in *Bacchae* is the role Zeus plays in Dionysus' birth. After Semele is destroyed, Zeus commands the infant Dionysus to "enter this male womb of mine" (527) and saves the child by sewing him into his thigh to complete gestation. Zeus is an incredibly patriarchal figure who is usually shown as being domineering and sexually aggressive yet here he takes on the anatomical function of a mother for Dionysus. Zeus and Dionysus both experience feminization yet are able to remain

⁶ Kurke, Leslie. *The Politics of Habrosyne*. Pp. 97.

powerful and respected because they are not held to the same standard as mortal men. In *Bacchae*, Dionysus is performing an *epiphany*, or taking human form to be able to interact with mortals. This is necessary for gods because humans are often hurt or killed by their true forms. For example, Dionysus' mother was destroyed before the events of *Bacchae* occurred because she encountered Zeus in the form of lightning (3). When a god takes human form, they can choose to appear as any gender or age. They select their appearance depending on their agenda⁷ and with whom they are interacting with. Athena, another immortal with a complex relationship with gender frequently makes epiphanies in the *Odyssey* that require her to alter her physical body and gender role. She appears to Telemachus as Mentos, an old wise man, and functions as a male authority figure would by advising the boy⁸. She also appears to the princess Nausicaa as a young maiden⁹, choosing specific types of epiphanies to better foster trust and adherence from the mortals she communicates with¹⁰. While Athena is a masculinized goddess much in the same way Dionysus is a feminized god, her epiphanies stay within the confines of normative identities. Mentor is a man; therefore, he acts, dresses, and relates to the younger Telemachus in all the typical ways a man would despite his true form being a goddess. Apart from Dionysus, epiphanies are almost always done to reflect normative Greek women and men. If Athena uses divine epiphany to ensure trust and obedience from the mortals she interacts with, this brings up the complicated question of why Dionysus selects such a subversive form. His androgynous

⁷ In *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture*, Petridou identifies one reason for divine epiphany as a "crisis management tool" where "epiphanies may be both generated by a crisis and may generate a crisis themselves". I would argue that Dionysus' epiphany is both a product of Theban impiety and the catalyst for a crisis itself. Petridou notes that festivals frequently do a "reenactment of a crisis that...involved this time a deity that was abused, ignored, or misunderstood by the human perceivers". This is another aspect of meta-theater.

⁸ Homer. *Odyssey*. Translated by Samuel Butler. Book 1. Pp. 32

⁹ Homer. *Odyssey*. Book 6. Pp. 137

¹⁰ Hanrahan, Caden. *Athena's Epiphanies in the Odyssey: A Study of Gender, Status, and Form*. Pp. 7

appearance destroys any chance at gaining trust and respect from Pentheus. If anything, it only brings immediate upheaval and suspicion. Dionysus comes to Thebes to avenge his slandered mother and to initiate the city into his ritual practice. During his introduction Dionysus proclaims, “for this city must learn well, even if it doesn’t want to learn, that it is still uninitiated in my bacchic rites” (38-40). This demonstrates that he intends to exact both revenge and worship through violence. I would like to suggest through further demonstration that Dionysus deliberately selects such an unconventional epiphany because he is trying to provoke and humiliate his enemies.

His desire for provocation is immediately successful because of the tension his gender presentation causes in Thebes. This is seen in his interactions with the young king Pentheus. Because Pentheus is so obsessed with policing the sexual morality of the maenads, he tries to assert himself as the voice of reason and traditional values, claiming that the city has been disrupted because the women have left their traditional place at the loom (216-217). He says, “whenever the liquid joy of the grape comes into women’s festivals, then, I assure you, there’s nothing wholesome in their rites” (260-262), expressing his belief that women who are outside of male control will naturally partake in promiscuity. Before even meeting Dionysus disguised as a human, Pentheus immediately recalls what he has heard about his appearance by calling him: “this effeminate looking stranger who brings a new disease to the women and dishonors their beds” (353-354). To Pentheus the most important feature of the stranger is his effeminacy. Tiresias responds to Pentheus by saying that Dionysus introduced wine to stop “sorrow and pain” (280). This idea of the god’s power, something beneficial rather than corrupting is something Pentheus will not even consider because he cannot separate effeminacy from sexual immorality. When they meet, Pentheus is immediately taken by Dionysus’ looks, saying: “well, stranger,

your body is indeed quite shapely, at least for enticing the women” (453-454). The way Pentheus’ focus lingers on Dionysus’ body suggests that the king himself is in some way enticed by the stranger’s beauty. He goes on commenting “those long side-curls of yours show for sure you’re no wrestler, rippling down your cheeks, infected with desire” (455-456), using erotic and almost tender words to describe him. This reveals that Pentheus doesn’t have any idea how to treat Dionysus because he doesn’t fit neatly anywhere into the gender binary. It also reveals what Pentheus is trying to hide, that beyond his distrust and lack of respect for femininity he finds it incredibly alluring. Dionysus anticipates this and uses Pentheus’ confusion to disarm him.

Dionysus and Pentheus are cousins and young men at the peak of their boyish beauty. This is mentioned when Agave describes Pentheus’ form, saying: “Look at this cheek, it’s just growing downy under the crop of his soft hair” (1186-1187). It was not socially acceptable for one youth to express desire for another in ancient Greece because it fell outside of the established model of appropriate sexual dynamics. In 5th century Athens there was no concept of heterosexuality or homosexuality, rather sexual relationships were defined by ranks of power. Between free men this could only include an older dominant male, an *erastes*, and a younger passive boy, an *eromenos*. Dionysus is not an erastes or eromenos, neither is he exactly a man or a woman. His androgyny and divinity make him unplaceable. By sexualizing Dionysus Pentheus is either publicly rejecting this established set of rules or he feels Dionysus’ androgyny excludes him from the respect he would extend to a more normative male. Pentheus does seem to be feminizing him because at the end of Pentheus’ commentary on the body of Dionysus he adds that the god is “hunting Aphrodite’s pleasures with [his] beauty” (459). This is exactly what he claimed the Theban maenads were doing. Pentheus has reacted to Dionysus’ feminine beauty by categorizing him the same way he does the rebellious women. The feminization of Dionysus

directly leads to him being labeled as hypersexual and sentenced to imprisonment by Pentheus in the city's dungeon (509-510). This interaction is summed up well when Dionysus says, "From a wise man to fools, I order them not to bind me" (504) to which Pentheus responds, "and I order them to bind you. I have more power than you" (505). This sort of violent and domineering treatment is such that only women and Dionysus receive because Pentheus doesn't concern himself with policing normative male sexuality. When Tiresias and Cadmus were wearing the maenadic costume, Pentheus protested but ultimately dismissed them, saying "if hoary old age weren't protecting you, you'd be sitting in chains with the rest of the bacchae" (258-259). However, considering that Pentheus was so eager to enslave his own mother, the sexual morality of Cadmus and Tiresias does not seem to threaten him too much. The same double standard applies to the messengers and guards he sends to interact with the rogue women. When the Theban herdsman comes to tell Pentheus about the crazed deeds of the maenads, Pentheus assures him, "speak openly since you won't be punished by me no matter what your story. [It isn't fitting to be angry with just men]" (672-673). Even though this man is still terrified of his wrath, Pentheus is demonstrating his ability to show mercy and understanding that he never extends to the maenads. This reiterates the larger prejudice within Greek culture that femininity is something to be controlled and subjugated to maintain peace.

Based on these stark contrasts between the way Pentheus interacts with men as opposed to how he treats Dionysus and the women, it is made clear that the androgyny Dionysus would not help him if he were mortal but objectifies his body and restricts his freedom. I suggest that he is intentionally playing the role of something Pentheus perceives as submissive to give him a false sense of control.

The same is true for Dionysus' foreignness. As Dionysus explains his Lydian background and his purpose for coming to Thebes Pentheus once again tries to establish himself as a defender of the patriarchy and Greek tradition. He trivializes the Dionysus' eastern culture by saying, "and does some local Zeus exist there, one who begets new gods? (467) and interrogates him about Dionysus' sacred mysteries. Pentheus writes off the legitimacy of Dionysian rites in part because these rituals are coming from Lydia. When Dionysus tells him that, "every one of the foreigners dances these rites" (482) Pentheus responds "that's because they're much more foolish than the Greeks" (483). Dionysus' Lydian identity makes Pentheus underestimate him just as much as his femininity does. Pentheus once again cannot conceal his obsession with female sexuality during this conversation, but he also seems to be implying that these rituals are sexually immoral because of their cultural origin. When the stranger responds, "in this case, at least, [the Lydians are] wise though theirs are different" (484) Pentheus immediately leaps to the conclusion that these rites take place at night because "darkness is devious and corrupts women" (487).

Pentheus' objectification of Dionysus then switches from confusion to domination. He treats the non-normative body as something that must be bound. This must happen either within the rules of the gender system of Greece in which women are confined to the home, to the loom, and to motherhood or if they cannot be confined in this way then the binding must be with chains. Dionysus does not escape this treatment as Pentheus tells him he will "cut off those luxurious curls of [his]" (493) and will "lock [him] up in prison" (497). Had Dionysus chosen his epiphany as a more typical man then the severity of this abuse would most likely have been avoided. Dionysus uses his feminine and foreign appearance to cater to this violent impulse because Pentheus' eventual humiliation becomes so much greater if it is at the hands of

something he deems weak. This fear is expressed by Pentheus when he says, “since this is too much to bear, that we suffer what we suffer at the hands of women” (785-786). While Dionysus doesn’t take on the role of a maenad because he is a god, he manipulates the costume and his gender presentation to psychologically torment Pentheus. This plot of humiliation is neatly summed up when he says, “I want the Thebans to mock him as we parade him through the city in his dainty disguise, after those terrifying threats of his” (854-856). Dionysus admits that Pentheus’ punishment is rooted in his own xenophobic/misogynistic insults against the god. This makes the theory of provocation more likely because Dionysus knew the man’s obsessive misogyny would incite Pentheus to chain him up and abuse him. Pentheus went to the mountain dressed as a woman because Dionysus wanted him to be humiliated the same way Pentheus had tried to humiliate him.

Dionysus’ gender presentation is unique and transgressive, but it does not work against the misogynistic Greek gender structure and benefits from the exploitation of marginalized identities rather than their progress. What the maenadic costume and foreign fashion provides for him is an excuse to incite abuse and mistrust from the Theban patriarchy, and because his immortal status prevents him from truly getting hurt, he has no intention to legitimately destroy this oppressive system. Dionysus is eager to depend on misogyny and xenophobia to undo his enemies, which shows that systemic oppression ultimately benefits him.

Pentheus

This brings us to the second part of Dionysus’ agenda, his manipulation of the identities of others. Pentheus’ relationship to the maenadic costume was complex and emotional long before he put it on. Because of Pentheus’ association of the bacchic rites with female sexual immorality this outfit inevitably takes on a level of eroticism for him. Pentheus’ entire

conception of womanhood is defined by physical appearance, and this is emphasized by his desire for voyeurism. For instance, when he says he would “give a vast weight in gold” (812) just to look at the maenads sitting on the mountain. He also seems incapable of interacting with Dionysus without commenting on his effeminate appearance. He introduces the god by commenting on “his long locks and golden curls all sweet-smelling his cheeks dark as wine, his eyes full of Aphrodite’s charms” (235-236) and continues to obsess over his feminine looks, meanwhile there is little attention paid to the physicality of masculine men throughout the entire play. This is significant because Pentheus is the one reinforcing the oppressive gender roles, unaware that Dionysus is counting on that.

Pentheus dresses in the maenadic costume only when he is quite divorced from rational thought. Dionysus admits to his bacchae that “if he reasons well, he definitely won’t be willing to dress in a woman’s costume. But if he drives off the road to reason, he will dress up” (852-853). Regardless of Pentheus’ obsession with femininity, this is a confirmation of his lack of consent. When Pentheus says, “and truly I seem to myself to see two suns and a double Thebes” (918-919), he confirms that by the time he wears the maenadic costume he is completely hallucinating. This issue of consent almost becomes obscured by Pentheus’ enthusiastic reaction to cross-dressing. Pentheus is very concerned about his performance as a woman, asking Dionysus, “How do I look, then? Don’t I carry myself like Ino or like Agave, my mother?” (925-926). This delight taken in the transformation of his identity is mirrored when Agave later rejoices at her hunting skills (1202-1207) and seems to be a product of sheer madness. This idea of repressed desire is complicated as Tiresias had earlier warned Pentheus “it is not Dionysus who will force women to be self-controlled in Aphrodite’s realm...for even in the revelries of Bacchus the self-controlled woman, at least, will not be corrupted” (314-318). However, I would argue that

Pentheus' apparent desire to wear the costume is not because he wants to dress like a woman, but because it allows him to spy on the women the way he has been fantasizing about. This voyeuristic intention is called out by the chorus of bacchae when they describe Pentheus as: "the man in his woman-miming costume, the deluded spy of the maenads" (980-981).

This is where Dionysus' exploitation comes into play. He uses the allure of spying on the women to get Pentheus to obey him. Pentheus begins to show more signs of respect towards Dionysus when he realizes Dionysus can help him actualize his desire to police the sexual immorality of the women. He responds affirmatively when Dionysus asks him "but still you would see with pleasure things that are bitter to you?" (815), reinforcing that viewing them has more of an erotic pull than a concern to enforce ethics. Pentheus' general discomfort with femininity means that Dionysus must manipulate Pentheus into thinking that he is maintaining his masculinity even while crossdressing. This is seen in the scene when Dionysus proposes that Pentheus put on a woman's costume by selling the idea through the lens of military strategy. He says: "are you no longer so eager to be a spectator of the maenads?" (829). This is the way that Pentheus can rationalize dressing up without complete emasculation. This trickery, along with Pentheus' lack of mental clarity makes putting on the maenadic costume a symbolic chaining of his body to the will of Dionysus. That reoccurring imagery of the binding of non-normative bodies is emphasized with Pentheus putting Dionysus in chains and Dionysus binding Pentheus psychologically within a maenadic costume. The costume consists of "a dress down to your feet. And for your hair we have a headband" (833) along with "a thyrsus for your hand and a spotted fawnskin" (835). After Pentheus is dressed Dionysus remarks "be seen by me wearing your costume of a woman, a maenad, a bacchant" (915). Pentheus' maenadic costume differs from Dionysus because it is explicitly referred to as a woman's garment. Pentheus calls it a "female

costume” (836) multiple times throughout crossing dressing, but it is unclear what makes this clothing different from that of Dionysus, Tiresias, or Cadmus. Nevertheless, Pentheus dressed as a female maenad is not something that can survive long in the ridged structure of binary gender. He is never acknowledged as a woman but a man in a “woman-miming costume” (980) and this ambiguous status seems to only be able to lead to his violent destruction. Dionysus is not a champion of the feminine, he uses it and its subjugation within the patriarchy to render his enemies weak.

Pentheus’ disguise of a female maenad shows the most obvious power of Dionysian power, which is to blur the lines between identities. This applies to gender, but it also affects his familial relationships. When Pentheus disguises himself as a maenad, the relationship he has with Agave is inverted and transformed into something unrecognizable. The mother and son are now forced to relate to each other as maenad to maenad. Before Dionysus goes to Cithaeron, he comments that Pentheus longs to be carried home in his mother’s arms (968) which given Pentheus’ fetishization of the Theban maenads implies his erotic desire for her embrace along with finding comfort in a child/parent dynamic. However, the feminized Pentheus has taken on the role of prey and the masculinized Agave has become the hunter in a grotesque reversal of their normative gender roles. This is also an unnatural mockery of their familial bond. During Pentheus’ slaughter he says to Agave, “It is I, mother, your son Pentheus to whom you gave birth in the house of Echion” (1118-1119) only for Agave to respond ripping his body apart. The Sparagmos or ritual tearing apart of a living beast in this scene reflects Agave and Pentheus’ reversed Greek sexual dynamics in the sense that Pentheus’ body is overpowered and entered by the dominant force of Agave. The child, who is central to normative kinship becomes the sacrificial victim, which can be seen as Agave rejecting her role of motherhood in favor of her

bond to Dionysus and the other Theban women. Of course, Agave does not desire or consent to this destruction of her family and identity, but the participation in the ritual forces Agave and Pentheus out of their normative roles regardless. Because of his lack of sanity and therefore lack of consent, Pentheus does nothing but maintain the systemic oppression of misogyny. By dressing as a woman and a maenad he submits to the societal restrictions that normative women also face. The violence, objectification, and vulnerability that women are often subjected to becomes his destiny. Dionysus intends this as the ultimate form of punishment, and because there is no space for a feminized man to exist in the Greek social structure it can only end in his forcible removal from the state, either in exile or in this case death.

The Theban Maenads

Pentheus' tyrannical misogyny makes the exodus of the Theban women from the city appear liberating. This is deceiving at first because although they escape the physical shackles of Pentheus their transformation into maenads places them into the psychological imprisonment of Dionysus. From a modern perspective the female restriction to a domestic setting is oppressive, but when the play's male audience is taken into consideration it is unlikely that escaping from the loom is being argued to be a good thing. Dionysus describes what he did to the women as "hounding them from their homes with fits of frenzy so that now, knocked out of their senses, they make their home on Mount Cithaeron" (33-34). This is a violent removal from the domestic role, and it strongly suggests that the women do not want to be taken away from their traditional spaces. Dionysus is not only ripping them out of the city, but also policing their bodies by forcing them to "wear the vestments of [his] mysteries" (35). They are then immediately sexualized and demonized for leaving their homes by Pentheus which would not give them very much incentive to do so voluntarily. The first thing Pentheus assumes about the Theban women

is that “each lady slinks off in a different direction to some secluded wilderness to service the lusts of men” (222-223). Despite there being no men present in the maenadic gathering and no evidence that the rites are sexual, the women are still condemned to capture and slavery. Again, the horrific lack of consent is overlooked when the messenger brings news to Pentheus of the women’s activities because they appear to be in a pastoral utopia. The messenger describes this to Pentheus as “they were all sound asleep, relaxed in their bodies, some leaning their backs on fir-tree foliage, others resting their heads on oak leaves, scattered on the ground haphazardly but modestly and not, as you claim, drunk with wine and flute music” (683-687). These women are pursuing leisure¹¹ without the intention of drunkenness or sex and yet they cannot escape objectification and voyeurism on the part of the men spying on them. When these women are removed from their traditional settings, they become a fantasy for Pentheus that Dionysus uses to manipulate his actions. This destroys any illusion that by leaving the city they somehow also leave the male gaze. Even before Pentheus’ death and their exile they are never liberated from patriarchal control. They are also not absolved from their role as women, merely displaced from it. This is seen when the messenger recounts that some of them were “holding in their arms a fawn or wild wolf cub, offering them white milk- those who had just given birth and whose breasts were still swollen” (699-701). This interspecies relationship shows that the Theban women are still performing a grotesque version of motherhood. Ultimately, they are placed in a setting that gives the illusion of freedom where freedom does not exist.

¹¹ In her book *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Bonnie Honig calls this leisure “inoperativity” (14) which refers to taking an object (or person) and “suspend[ing] its old use, and ideally, repurpose it to a new use that is post-use, not a means to any end” (140). Honig is arguing that leaving the city and becoming unproductive is an act of defiance against the patriarchy of Thebes. This doesn’t consider the lack of consent on the part of the women nor the fact that they are being used as a means to an end by Dionysus.

The subversion of the traditional female identity is proven to be anything but empowering at the end of the play. This is seen in the intentionally horrific way Agave describes her success as a great hunter. She boasts:

“O you dwellers of Thebes, city of beautiful ramparts, come so you can see this prey of a beast that we, the daughters of Cadmus, have hunted down not with thonged Thessalian javelins, not with nets, but with the sharp white blades of our hands. So who would brag that he owns the weapons of spear-makers? They are useless! With our very own hands we captured this one here and piece by piece tore to shreds the limbs of the beast. Where is my father, the old man? Let him come near! And Pentheus, my son, where is he? Let him take and raise a sturdy ladder against the palace so he can climb up and nail to the triglyphs this lion’s head that I have hunted and brought here” (1202-1215).

This speech contrasts very gendered imagery with various hunting weapons used by men put down in favor of “the sharp white blades of our hands” (1206--1207). This invokes an association between femininity and a lack of advanced technology. The women are living so in accordance with nature that their behavior becomes animalistic. Agave is imagining herself to be a superior hunter to men because of her savage efficiency, but by taking on this masculine role she inadvertently destroys her identity as a mother by murdering her child. Agave is calling out to her father and her son because she wants to be acknowledged as a successful provider for her household. Pentheus’ father, Echion is nowhere to be seen in *Bacchae*, and the two male heirs of the family, Pentheus and Acteon, both die tragically after angering the gods. The absence of young men in the Theban royal family makes Agave, although unaware, act as a replacement for the missing male providers. By forcing Agave to become a maenad, Dionysus destroys her legitimacy as a daughter and a mother. Agave did the same thing to Dionysus’ mother by asserting that Semele hid an affair by claiming she was impregnated by Zeus (26-29). By making her switch roles with her son, Dionysus ensures that Agave can neither find peace in either a masculine or feminine identity.

The banishment of the Theban women makes it impossible for them to ever return to the domestic sphere. Dionysus refers to Agave as “wretched woman” (1306) which shows that her (unwilling) rejection of motherhood and traditional womanhood have rendered her corrupted forever. Unlike the Lydian bacchae who wander the world under the protection of Dionysus, the Theban princesses have no men to guide them, and this is seen as a terrible fate. When Cadmus asks Agave why she throws her arms around him she says, “where shall I turn after having been banished from my fatherland” (1364-1366) which shows that now that the women are sane, they abhor the idea of a departure from the patriarchy. Dionysus has used these women to incite male violence against them and now depends on their lack of agency to continue to punish them once they are exiled. Agave rebukes Dionysus in whatever way is left to her with her farewell address:

“Escort me, O friends, to where we will gather my sisters, companions in exile and in sadness. May I go where neither polluted Cithaeron [can see me] nor I polluted Cithaeron, nor where any memorial of the thyrsus is dedicated. Let these- Cithaeron and the Thyrsus- be the care of other Bacchae” (1381-1387).

Dionysus has accomplished his mission of revenge and initiation, but while Agave was forced to acknowledge the god she denied, she still refuses to honor him and leave Thebes with some semblance of dignity. This rejection of his rites is the only voluntary act Agave does in the entire play, which is a strong indicator that nothing the god has done for the Theban women has been empowering.

The Bacchic Chorus

The chorus of onstage bacchae are women who have followed Dionysus to Greece from their homeland in Lydia. They are difficult to completely understand because it is never specified if they are in Thebes on their own free will. Nevertheless, they don't appear to have been punished by the god and therefore have a different status than the unlucky Thebans. Dionysus addresses them as, “women I wooed from foreign lands” (56) which could allude to the

god's hypnotic seduction but like Tiresias, these women appear to have a good relationship with Dionysus, and not subjected to the violent "wooing" that the Theban maenads were. Despite this luxury, the Lydian bacchae demonstrate how adopting the maenadic identity, even consensually, does not lead to female liberation. In the choral entrance song, they proclaim "O blessed is he who, happy in his heart, knows the initiation rites of the gods, purifies his life and joins his soul to the cult group, dancing on the mountains, with holy purifications celebrating the bacchic rituals" (72-77). Although the women describe this happiness in the third person, the phrasing suggests that they have found gratification through initiation into the cult. The parallels between their circumstances and this advice they give implies that they find fulfillment and joy in the service of Dionysus which the Theban maenads eventually reject. Finding this type of pleasure in a religious calling is unusual for young Greek women who would otherwise be expected to find a calling in domestic work and raising children. Later in their choral song they recite Dionysus' words in which he refers to them, "like a filly grazing with her mother" (167). This filly imagery is common in descriptions of maidens because when a young girl is married, she is thought to be yoked and broken in like a horse. This idea is reemphasized when they describe themselves, "like a fawn amid the green delights of the meadow when it has escaped the fearful hunt". They use this simile to convey the feeling that the bacchic dancing brings to them, that through their devotion to Dionysus they are freed of the cages other women must go to. The liberation of their rank is praised once again when the Lydian women say:

"If only I could go to Cyprus, island of Aphrodite, home of the Love gods, those erotic bewitchers of mortal minds inhabitants of Paphos, which the hundred mouths of a foreign river fertilize without rain! If only I could go to exquisite Pieria, home of the Muses, sacred slopes of Olympus! Take me there Bromios, roaring spirit who leads the Bacchic throng amid shouts of joy. There the graces live and there Desire. And there it is lawful for the Bacchae to celebrate your mysteries." (402-415)

This is where their freedom starts to become questionable. These women are expressing their desire to travel to holy sites but their phrasing of “if only I could” implies that they can’t have this freedom without Dionysus’ permission. Dionysus allows them to travel in a way that most Greek women can’t, yet they don’t travel on accord of their own agency. This restriction is echoed when the Lydian women entreat Dionysus to protect them from Pentheus. They say: “soon he will bind me, Bromios’ servant, in a noose. Already he detains my fellow-reveller Inside the palace hidden in a dark prison.” (545-549). Here Dionysus is the only protection they have from bondage. This gives them a glimpse into what could happen to women who do not stay in a domestic setting. This domestic versus maenadic role is brought up again when Pentheus says: “And as for these women you’ve brought as collaborators in your evil deeds, either we’ll sell them or I’ll keep them as family possession, slaves at my looms, after, that is, I’ve stopped their hands from banging out that rat-a-tat-tat on their drums” (511-514). This threat goes beyond the restriction of their bodies but also promises to break their spirit by literally replacing the cultic function of their hands with an enslaved domestic purpose. This puts them in the position of having their fates entirely dependent on Pentheus and Dionysus. The fact that one of them is trying to protect them does not give them more agency in the matter. The Lydian women fear they will be punished for their roles as bacchae, which although it has great religious significance, remains a non-traditional female lifestyle. Their bacchic status saves them from being bound physically, but they remain in a submissive role, nonetheless.

The rites themselves make the women, “wearied but not wearied” (66)¹². This is almost exactly what Tiresias says when he and Cadmus discuss their release from the limitations of old

¹² The maenadic costume here is also a performance costume. Because women were forbidden from participating in theatrical productions in 5th century Athens, these garments did possess the ability to visually transform the gender presentation of male actors playing female characters. Timothy Powers’ research on the Citharodic costume, a garment called the *skeuê* worn by musicians for public performances, touches on the idea that

age, showing that these women must also receive supernatural vigor from their worship of Dionysus. This strength does make them less vulnerable to abuse and yet it is entirely conditional on their commitment to Dionysus. They are free to roam across the Mediterranean with supernatural abilities in a (nearly) entirely female company, but does this mean anything if they could not do so without masculine guidance? Aggressive and boisterous emotional expression of these women is another complex area. The Lydian women begin the play with a similar purpose to Tiresias, which is to inform Thebes about the power of Dionysus and encourage Pentheus to honor him. They entreat the city to, “rave with bacchic frenzy” (109) but they rationalize this by talking of the pleasures devotion can bring. The women continue to encourage bacchic revelry with idyllic descriptions such as “the ground flows with milk, flows with wine, flows with the nectar of bees” (141-143), offering liberation through indulgence and leisure. This attitude changes when they hear Pentheus’ impious rhetoric and observe him talking of imprisoning the Theban women that he catches. The chorus begins to shift focus from the rewards to be gained from the god to longing to escape to a place that properly respects Dionysus. Their condemnation of Pentheus seems more chastising than bloodthirsty when they say things such as, “misfortune is the result of unbridled mouths and lawless folly” (386-388). So far, these women are bordering on disrespect by talking of revelry and scolding the ruler of Thebes, but they are not breaking any great social taboos. The emotional shift from good natured devotion to terror and frenzy happens when Dionysus causes an earthquake to destroy the Theban palace. Upon hearing the god’s voice, the bacchae say, “Throw your trembling bodies to the ground! Maenads, throw your

the costume itself left the performer “possessed” by the powers of the god they were invoking. The Citharode is a different type of performer from the actors in *Bacchae*, but the role of the costume remains largely the same as each character undergoes the symptoms of possession. This clarifies the supernatural and psychological effects that wearing the maenadic costume has on the play’s characters. When each character talks about enhanced strength and stamina this possession only occurs when one is dressed as a maenad.

body down! For the king, Zeus' son, will come rushing upon this house, turning it upside down" (600-603). Even though they know it is Dionysus causing the destruction, for a moment the chorus seems to be genuinely terrified of their leader. The moment Dionysus resorts to violence the chorus' begins to become more and more aggressive. This link between the god and his followers would suggest that the women are influenced into feeling this way. At the beginning of the play Tiresias describes the onset of frenzy and revelry as the god "com[ing] into the body in full force" (300) and considering that their emotional turmoil coincides with the anger of the god it does seem like something akin to possession. Historically women in 5th century BC Athens were limited in their ability to express themselves emotionally in public. It was only acceptable for women to do so as mourners¹³ at funerals, where they would often be depicted as tearing out their hair and beating their breasts to properly lament the deceased. The Lydian chorus' celebration of Pentheus' death is the antithesis of this tradition. Their bloodlust reaches its peak just as Pentheus and Dionysus set off to mount Cithaeron. Their words are full of prophecies that end up becoming fulfilled, such as, "for [Pentheus] was not born from the blood of women. No, his birth was from some lioness" (988-989) which is referring to Pentheus being mistaken for a lion cub by his mother. This mantic power is another sign of Dionysus possession (299). When the messenger condemns the women's delight at the horrific news the chorus says, "I am a foreigner. I cry 'euoi' in ecstasy with my barbarian songs. No longer do I cower under the fear of chains" (1034-1035). This open rejection of the policing of their bodies shows that along with physical freedom maenadism allows them to express themselves in ways that regular women would be punished for. Their moods, desires, and words are all linked to those of Dionysus however, and they go on to say, "Dionysus, not Thebes, has power over me"

¹³ Hame, Kerri J. *Female Control of Funeral Rites in Greek Tragedy: Klytimestra, Medea, and Antigone*. Pp. 2

(1037-1038) as a reminder that they have exchanged their mortal male guardians for a divine one, and are nevertheless still under the control of a male god. There are differences between a male ruler and a male god regarding their treatment of women. Although Dionysus does not physically force them to serve him the way Pentheus would, he makes the bacchae dependent on him for protection and uses their disadvantaged positions as women to leverage this power. One of the things that the bacchae have in common with those being punished is that they don't seem to be able to return to their previous lives. This demonstrates the illusion of their freedom and choice even as they wander the globe.

Tiresias

Tiresias appears as a neutral party in many tragic plays, foreshadowing the inevitable consequences that come to characters who disrespect the gods or attempt to selfishly rewrite their own fate. In myth, Tiresias was given the gift of wisdom and foresight after being struck blind by Hera. His sound advice is never heeded except by himself, and while other characters are punished severely for their arrogance, his respect for the will of the gods saves him from harm. He is the only character in *Bacchae* who can both avoid Dionysus' vengeance and still maintain his own sanity.

Tiresias and Cadmus are the only men to voluntarily dress as a maenad. Similar to Pentheus' concern with being emasculated by the maenadic costume and rituals, Cadmus questions whether dressing and dancing as a bacchant is appropriate for someone of their age. When he does join Tiresias, they are mocked and criticized by Pentheus: "I am ashamed sir, to see your old age so devoid of common sense" (252). Cadmus is concerned with the way he will be perceived, asking Tiresias: "will someone say that I show no respect for old age just because I

intended to dance all decked out in ivy wreaths?" (204-207). Tiresias' response emphasizes that Dionysian rituals, in their inclusion of everyone, blur the societal norms of age along with gender norms: "No! For the god has not determined whether it is the young or the old who must dance" (204-207). Unlike the other characters in the play, Tiresias does not resist the temporary subversion of identity that Dionysian rituals require and is thus spared from punishment. Tiresias' prioritizes his respect for the gods over societal norms, demonstrating that the maenadic identity can be liberating to those who don't resist the will of Dionysus. Beyond liberating himself from the social norms of age, Tiresias—and, temporarily, Cadmus—are granted strength and agility by Dionysus (187). The two are also able to remain sane, unlike the Lydian and Theban women who are driven mad when they receive the same blessing. Cadmus mentions that he, "won't tire, day or night, striking the ground with [his] thyrsus. Gladly [they've] forgotten that [they're] old men" (187-189). The two men can enjoy a gentle reprieve from the limitations of their bodies, which shows, like the Theban and Lydian women, that partaking in this ritual grants them strength and agility that their aged bodies do not naturally have. Unlike the superhuman abilities that the Theban maenads are given, Cadmus and Tiresias maintain their sanity throughout the play. Tiresias' brief cameo in *Bacchae* does not explicitly clarify his fate, but his storylines across other tragedies suggest almost definitively that he escapes punishment. Additionally, he and Cadmus are seen as "a grey-haired old pair" (324) so it follows that if Tiresias were punished, his sentencing would have been carried out in conjunction with that of Cadmus. In fact, Tiresias' glaring absence at the end of the play strongly further suggests that, after properly honoring Dionysus, he was able to go free. Tiresias freely embraces maenadism not out of self-interest, but out of reverence for Dionysus. Like Dionysus, he endures temporary ridicule, knowing that the powers of the god will ultimately protect him. Tiresias

presumably is allowed, unlike Cadmus, and return to his original position in society. The other characters inability to do so makes this an important distinction. This reward resonates with Dionysus' claim that "he is, in the ritual of initiation, a god most terrifying, but for mankind a god most gentle" (860-861).

Cadmus

Like Tiresias, Cadmus is quick to embrace the maenadic costume and follow Dionysus, but his motives for doing so are not entirely pious. As the patriarch of Thebes, Cadmus sees an opportunity to boost the status of the Theban royal family by claiming a god as his nephew. Cadmus was not the catalyst for the Theban royal family's refusal to acknowledge that Semele gave birth to a god (28) but remained largely ambivalent. Upon Dionysus' return, Cadmus follows Dionysus to leverage the situation in the family's favor. He seems to acknowledge the legitimacy of the god when he says to Tiresias, "as vigorously as we can, we must exalt Dionysus to greatness since he is my daughter's son" (181-182). But he gives somewhat sacrilegious advice to Pentheus by saying: "even if this god does not exist, let him be considered a god in your eyes. Lie for a good cause, say that he is Semele's child. In this way she might seem to have given birth to a god and honor might accrue our entire family" (333-336). Cadmus' decision to follow Dionysus is partially a tactical move, and this is enough of a false pretense that he too cannot escape punishment. Initially, honoring the god seems to work out for him. Cadmus not only maintains his sanity, but also enjoys the same enhanced strength and youthfulness as Tiresias. Dionysus is not fooled by Cadmus' apparent enthusiasm, however. His punishment, though delayed, is strange and specific. Upon Pentheus' death, Cadmus is forced out of retirement, back into a young man's role of military commander. He loses the strength

Dionysus had temporarily granted him, and his words: “gladly we’ve forgotten that we’re old men” (188) come back to haunt him.

Upon Pentheus’ death, Cadmus is forced out of retirement, charged by Dionysus with commanding a foreign army: “You will drive a wagon of oxen, leading foreigners. You will sack many cities with your armies of countless men” (1334-1335). After learning of his grandson’s brutal death, he realizes the true extent of his punishment. Age and gender carry with them widely accepted expectations in ancient Greek society. Cadmus’ elite political status in Thebes further enforces the expectations that come with his advanced age. For him to have to take on the role of a younger man, especially one as physically demanding as leading an army means that he will live out the rest of his life in pain. It also means perpetual humiliation for him to not be granted peace in his old age. Cadmus is also unable to properly fulfill the duties of a father and an old man anymore. He cannot protect his daughter from exile, and he mourns this when he says: “why do you embrace me with your hands, wretched child, like a swan protecting its white-haired, helpless drone of a parent” (1364-1365). He also cannot watch Pentheus grow up. Cadmus and Pentheus’ roles in the family are also inverted because of this. Pentheus is buried at the prime of his youth and Cadmus is forced to keep living in another unnatural dynamic. Because Cadmus had no sons, Pentheus was his heir and protector in old age. He says to the corpse of Pentheus, “it was you, child, who held my palace together” (1309), showing that without him Cadmus is forced back into a role of authority that he cannot command.

If the death of Pentheus, the humiliation of himself and his family, and his forced return to the role of a younger man weren’t enough, Dionysus adds one more symbolic flair to Cadmus’ merciless punishment. He sentences Cadmus to be, “changed into a serpent” (1330), an animal that is mythologically tied both to maenadism and to Cadmus himself. The Theban women

reportedly use living snakes to bind their garments together (698), a disturbing reference to the snake shaped jewelry that maenads are often depicted as wearing in vase paintings¹⁴.

Furthermore, Cadmus is transformed into the very type of creature that he originally defeated to claim the land and found the city of Thebes. By turning into a snake, Cadmus comes full circle, becoming, disgracefully, the very beast whose defeat had led him to his powerful and respected position. The power of the Theban lands had transition from beast to man and then back to beast.

This final addition to Cadmus' punishment is a great example of Dionysus' love of ironic punishments. By becoming a decorative symbol of Dionysus, himself and losing his status, freedom, and identity, Cadmus is subjected to a twisted and personal form of enslavement.

Putting on the outfit of the god for pragmatic reasons was an insult to Dionysus, and this insult is answered ten times over. Along with his grandson—who shares a similarly symbolic fate when he is turned into a functional object of Dionysian worship by having his head placed on the tip of Agave's Thyrsus—Cadmus is transformed into a part of the maenadic costume itself. Most of the characters in this play are subjected to Dionysus' power to subvert binary gender, but the effect it has on Cadmus explores its potential to destroy the boundaries between man and beast.

Conclusion

Despite Dionysus' ultimate support of the patriarchal system, the play does not end in the reinstatement of order in the city. In fact, it leaves the palace destroyed and all the living royal Thebans unable to return to their traditional roles ever again. Pentheus, Agave, and Cadmus are each indefinitely displaced as the “man in his woman-miming costume” (980), the “wretched woman” (1282), and the “old and alien settler” (1355). The temporary liberation that Tiresias and the Lydian bacchae enjoy demonstrates the rewards that following the will of the gods allows.

¹⁴ For reference see Brygos Painter, “Maenad”, Attic Wine Cup, 490 BCE.

But for marginalized identities these rewards are given under conditional devotion of Dionysus. In conclusion, Dionysus uses the maenadic identity as a form of control and oppression, not liberation. When the maenadic costume transforms each character into something transgressive, it forces them to exist in a society that has no place for them, ending in their misery or death. Dionysus also uses his androgyny and foreign status to encourage violence against him, while also refusing to emancipate his female followers from these systems. With the play's original audience of affluent Athenian men in mind, it seems to reinforce the idea that non-normative identities need to be controlled for the safety of all. Though *Bacchae* can easily be misconstrued as something radical and progressive, it reveals the rampant misogyny, xenophobia, and homophobia of ancient Athenian society.

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