

5-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Leffner, Nikolai M. '15, "The Grapes of Dionysus's Wrath: An Analysis of the Principal Characters and Themes in Eurpides' Tragedy, The Bacchae" (2012). *First-Year Writing Contest*.

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The Grapes of Dionysus's Wrath:
An Analysis of the Principal Characters and Themes
In Eurpides's Tragedy, The Bacchae

Nikolai M. Leffner

Civilization and Barbarism

Professor Rui Zhu

September 19, 2011

Hunt down evil by committing evil – that sounds like a wise way to proceed.
--Dionysus, Lines 1029-1030, The Bacchae

The dynamic, omnipresent conflict between the polarized forces of order and chaos is a common theme throughout ancient and modern literature alike. However, this concept is never treated with more discretion and precision than in the highly controversial and renowned work of the Greek tragedian Euripides, The Bacchae. In tones both reverent and nihilistic, Euripides documents the tragic tale of two principal characters—the earthly sovereign of Thebes, Pentheus, and his estranged cousin, the wrathful deity Dionysus—and how one society's inability to reconcile its traditional values with new modes of thought ultimately culminates in the destabilization of that society itself. At once a universal warning and a dire premonition of the fall of Grecian civilization, Euripides' vision of a dystopian Thebes invites both critical and personal reflection and ultimately, leaves the reader with a single, salient question: What does it mean to be civilized?

The Bacchae opens with an introduction by the first of these two polarized characters, the deity Dionysus, who represents the forces of chaos, freedom, and nature, in all of their unmitigated and excessive glory. Serving as an informal narrator, the deity explains the current state of affairs: the people of the Grecian city of Thebes, where Dionysus was born, refuse to acknowledge his divinity, treat him as a foreigner, and even insult his mother's name. In response, Dionysus declares that “this city [Thebes] has to learn, though against its will,/ that it has yet to be initiated/ into my Dionysian rites,” and subsequently sets in motion a series of events which will lead to the destruction of life for

the Thebans.¹ But in exacting his personal vengeance, Dionysus reveals that he is not only a god of destruction, but of creation, and that his differences are only terrifying if the citizens of Thebes continue to ostracize and alienate him.

As the play then goes on to demonstrate, despite his different outlook on life and civilization, Dionysus displays numerous beneficent qualities, which, if used in moderation, could help the people of Thebes. As a deity who exalts the natural order and the individual's freedom from constraints, Dionysus challenges commonly held societal preconceptions and defies the ordered nature of Greek society in ways which call attention to the system's flaws. Of primary interest is the importance he places on equality—he ignores such societal distinctions as social class, nationality, and wealth, and as the legendary blind seer Tiresias states, “whether the dancing is for young or old,/ he wants to gather honours from us all,/ to be praised communally, without division.”² Further, his primary supporters are women, whom he encourages to engage in activities which lie outside their prescribed roles as mothers and second-class citizens in Greek society. Finally, Dionysus symbolically represents a union of multiple cultures in a single whole—he is Greek by birth, but due to his frequent travels, understands the diverse nationalities of Asia. In this way, he serves as an equalizing force, empowering those who lack power in their daily lives and offering a new view of humanity that is not divided along the seemingly arbitrary lines established by societal traditions.

Moreover, Dionysus is not only a god of freedom and chaos but also of nature's bounty. Like other Mediterranean agricultural gods, including the Sumerian Tammuz, the Egyptian Osiris, and the Canaanite Adonis, Dionysus is defined by generosity and

¹ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, trans. Ian Johnston (Arlington, VA : Richer Resources Publications, 2003), accessed September 19, 2011, <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/euripides.htm>, Line 50.

² Euripides. *The Bacchae*, Line 260.

self-sacrifice. He is a Dying God, associated with the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, and a Sacrificial God, offering up the bounty of the earth in a symbolic offering of himself. In fact, one can easily draw a parallel between the figure of Dionysus and one of the most famous Dying Gods: Jesus Christ. The most important similarity can be found in Dionysus's association with the symbolic drinking of wine, which offered the Greek people a release from pain and sorrow, as well as a release valve for internal tensions. One can easily observe this parallel when Tiresias, the blind seer, once again comments on the nature of Dionysus's domain:

He brought with him liquor from the grape,
something to match the bread from Demeter.
He introduced it among mortal men.
When they can drink up what streams off the vine,
unhappy mortals are released from pain.
It grants them sleep, allows them to forget
their daily troubles. Apart from wine,
there is no cure for human hardship.
He, being a god, is poured out to the gods,
so human beings receive fine benefits
as gifts from him.³

Here, we see a direct correlation between a form of Bacchic symbolism—the consumption of bread and wine as representations of divinity—and the Christian sacrament of Communion. Altogether, these numerous traits indicate that Dionysus' presence could be helpful to Greek society if accepted into its social consciousness.

³ Euripides, The Bacchae, Lines 350-360.

On the other side of this spectrum is the king of Thebes, Pentheus, who is both Dionysus's cousin and his dramatic foil. Whereas Dionysus serves as an agent of change and destabilization, challenging typical Grecian values with his Bacchanalian rites and celebrations, Pentheus serves as a champion of the Grecian social order, and, therefore, attempts to maintain the status quo at any cost. However, Pentheus takes his position as the guardian of order too far, and his strictness is reflected in his own repressed sexuality and need to assert his authority over all those around him. His façade of outer strength and political clout belies his true nature—he is a man who is insecure in his masculinity and who cannot accept the fact that he too shares the very same desires which motivate the Bacchantes to perform their primal, barbaric rituals. By refusing to acknowledge the duality of his own human nature, which simultaneously incorporates elements which are both savage and civilized, Pentheus forces himself to live in a state of self-denial which prevents true autonomous thought and compels him to control everything around him.

This character trait is primarily evident in such passages as this:

DIONYSUS: I warn you—you shouldn't tie me up.

I've got my wits about me. You've lost yours.

PENTHEUS: But I'm more powerful than you,

so I'll have you put in chains.

DIONYSUS: You're quite ignorant

of why you live, what you do, and who you are.⁴

Here, we see that Pentheus wields his political authority like a bludgeon, striking back at societal ills with the same fervor he uses to beat back his personal demons—in essence, his need for control prevents him from retaining control of himself. This lack of

⁴ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, Lines 629-634.

self-control will eventually become his undoing, as Pentheus later falls to the very temptation created by his repressed emotions—he spies on the mysterious, forbidden rituals of the Bacchantes, and when discovered, meets a grisly fate at the hands of those who have adopted a form of behavior as extreme as Pentheus himself.

In this way, because the Thebans deny Dionysus and his cult, they not only deny their fundamental, primal characteristics, but the very thought that another culture beyond their own may have different answers to the quintessential question of the human condition. By rejecting such a culture out of a self-defeating fear of the unknown and the unusual, the Thebans categorize the Dionysian cult as a foreign and hostile presence and thus lose sight of the potential benefits an alternate perspective can offer to improve their own society. In this manner, the Thebans claim that their culture's paradigm of oppressive, yet constructive, order is superior to the chaotic, naturalist equalitarianism of Dionysus and his followers and disregard the possibility that the extremity of both sides only perpetuates violence, corruption, and despair. Accordingly, when the two cultures, as exemplified through the extreme characters of Dionysus and Pentheus, clash in a battle for superiority, they overlook the potential benefits of peaceful interaction—they could instead learn from one another, moderating the structured, civilizing force of one culture with the cathartic freedom of the other.

Ultimately, The Bacchae is a highly complex and multifaceted work that demonstrates the inherent destructiveness of extreme points of view, while simultaneously exposing the importance of barbaric modes of thought within the framework of conventional society. Garbing his message in the stylistic form of a mythological Greek tragedy, Euripides writes far more than a simple retelling of an

ancient story; rather, he completely redefines the way any society can judge its internal countercultures. In this manner, Euripides reveals how a balance between an appreciation for old modes of thought and an acceptance of new ideas provides the greatest benefit to society, expounding the quintessential necessity of moderation while enumerating the truly horrific consequences of its absence.

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