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# Euripides' Bakkhai and the Colonization of Sophrosune: A Translation with Commentary

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EURIPIDES' *BAKKHAI* AND THE COLONIZATION OF *SOPHROSUNE*:  
A TRANSLATION WITH COMMENTARY

A Thesis Presented  
by  
Shannon K. Farley

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS  
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Comparative Literature

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By

SHANNON FARLEY

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ABSTRACT  
EURIPIDES' *BAKKHAI* AND THE COLONIZATION OF *SOPHROSUNE*:  
A TRANSLATION WITH COMMENTARY  
FEBRUARY 2008  
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Directed by: Professor William Moebius

The first section of this thesis was developed from two major papers I had written during my coursework for the degree. The first, entitled “Orientalism and Dionysos: a look at translations of Euripides’ *Bakkhai*,” was written for Edwin Genzler’s Translation and Postcolonial Theory class in the spring of 2002. The second, “Postcolonial Greek: Hellenism and Identity in the Early Roman Empire,” was written for Maria Tymoczko’s Translation Theory and Practice class in the spring of 2007. Together, they argue that Greek literature is postcolonial in that it was used by the Roman Empire to certain ends, which resulted in its interpretation being influenced and changed by means of that Roman power and legacy throughout Western Europe, and that Euripides’ *Bakkhai* in particular was misinterpreted for centuries as a result of that influence.

The second section of my thesis is a translator’s note, which discusses the particular theory behind my translation strategy, as well as the choices I made concerning spelling, lines missing from the manuscript, et cetera. The third section of the thesis is the translation itself, on which I began in the fall of 2002 and finished this past summer.

The final section of this thesis is a commentary on the play itself. I have focused on the concepts of *sophrosune* (safemindedness) and *paideia* (education) around which to weave my analysis. The central idea is that the play serves as a lesson to the audience that *sophrosune* is part of Dionysos’ sphere, and to deny the life-affirming nature of his ritual is to court danger—the danger of rigidity and oppression. The death of Pentheus, after he rejects this

education despite Dionysos' best efforts to dissuade him, is merely an object lesson, not the repudiation of Dionysos' worship and the Greek gods as a whole that previous generations have held it to be.

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION: ON *ORIENTALISM*, DIONYSOS, AND TRANSLATIONS OF  
THE *BAKKHAI*

In his seminal work, *Orientalism*, Edward Said accuses Europe of defining “the Orient,” both for itself and for “Orientals” through knowledge and power. For, by establishing the field of study known as “Orientalism,” Europeans have given themselves the power to establish what the “objective” knowledge about the Orient is. Said claims the establishment of Orientalism as a field of study occurred in 1312, when a series of chairs in the languages of Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac were established at Paris, Oxford, Bologna, Avignon and Salamanca. (Said, 50) The inclusion of Greek in this list seems to suggest that some considered Greek to be one of the more “Eastern” languages; however, Said considers the ancient Greeks to be as much “European” as the racist imperialists with whom he opens his first chapter: Arthur James Balfour considers himself and the Western nations knowledgeable about and therefore worthy to judge Egypt’s ability to govern itself; (32) Evelyn Baring, Lord Cromer, cites “want of accuracy” as the “main characteristic of the Oriental mind;” (38) and finally Henry Kissinger, slightly less blatantly, depicts the developing nations in general as irrational, claiming that, for them, “the real world is almost completely internal to the observer.” (47)

There is difficulty in Said’s inclusion of Greece in his “European” nations. While it is true that the ancient Greeks came to consider the peoples to the East, especially Persia, to be *βάρβαρος*, they considered equally inferior *any* non-Greek speaker. Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon defines the word *βάρβαρος* as “barbarous, i.e. not Greek, foreign...originally all that were not Greeks.” When Said offers Aeschylus’ *Persians* and



Euripides' *Bakkhai* as proof of “two of the most profoundly influential qualities associated with the East,” he takes it for granted that the “European imagination” sits in the minds of the Greeks. (56) *Persians* is supposed to be a symbol of the weakness and emptiness of Asia, having lost, in the form of Persia, to Europe, in the form of Greece. What Said fails to mention is that *Persians* is a historical play, produced at Athens in 472 BCE, eight years after the battle at Salamis, which the play depicts. Xerxes had led the Persians to conquer Greece, and the Athenians' victory, rather than that of a vibrant Europe defeating a decrepit Asia as Said seems to think, could be considered that of an (almost) colonized nation throwing off its (potential) oppressors. There was no “Europe vs. the East” dynamic at this point; “Europe” as a concept did not yet exist. It is true that, as a result of this war, the Greeks began to attribute negative qualities to the *Βάρβαροι* to the east and Athens specifically began to consider itself the center of a Western culture; however, the strength of Athens at the point was definitely not taken for granted. The play serves to celebrate the *unlikely* victory, while, typical in Greek tradition, honoring the valor of the enemies. In the introduction to his translation of *Persians*, Seth G. Benardete points out that the play “testifies to the humanity of Aeschylus and the Athenians. No other tragedian we know of, of any country at any time, has ever dared to go so far in sympathizing with his country's foe... Here are the Persians, having started an unjust war and suffering a deserved defeat, presented not as criminals but rather as great and noble, dying deaths that are to be as much pitied as the deaths of Athenians.” (Aeschylus II, 44) It is clear that Aeschylus' play was not meant as a demonstration of Asian unworthiness or obsolescence (the Persian Empire was far from past its peak at this point), but as a commentary on the humanity of both peoples. Such Greek sympathy with both sides in war can also be noted in the *Iliad*, which depicts

another war of West versus East (Troy generally being considered to have been located on the western coast of Asia Minor). Homer does not consider the Trojans *βάρβαροι*; their gods and language are the same. The real conflict in the Iliad is gods versus men, and the men on both sides of the Aegean were of one culture in the time of Homer, fighting the universal fight of humanity versus the forces over which they have no control. The Greeks had long straddled the line between East and West, and though they did consider the Persians to be “barbaric” and inferior, Said’s naming it an issue of “Europe” vs. “Asia” is anachronism. The nascent separation of the Greeks’ regard toward the East became the intermediate superior attitude of the Romans that, in turn, grew to become a definitive split after the advent of Christianity.

Over a century later, Alexander the Great would further demonstrate the fluidity of this dividing line between East and West. After the victory of Athens over Persia, he provided the means for the Greeks to have their revenge by marching into Persia and liberating Persian colonies. One cannot precisely say that Alexander was conquering and setting up his own empire, for, when a city had surrendered or welcomed him, he established a *native* governor and moved on. Alexander loved Persian culture, and adopted many Persian customs such as modes of dress. It did not sit well with some of his generals, but it demonstrates further the indefinite nature of this so-called East-West divide that Said considers so rigid.

When Said cites *Bakkhai* as “perhaps the most Asiatic of all the Attic dramas” (Said, 56), he begs the question of what “Asiatic” is. He states, “Dionysus is explicitly connected with his Asian origins and with the strangely threatening excesses of Oriental mysteries.”

(Ibid.) As I discuss at length in my bachelor's honors thesis, *Dionysos: The God Brings Moderation*, Dionysos did not in fact have Asian origins. There were notable parallels between Dionysos and some Asian gods, but this was because he was the natural embodiment of a sphere of life that exists in all peoples and nations, whether Oriental or Occidental: alienation and transcendence. Said's division of Greece as Western and Dionysos as Eastern is canonical, however. It is a tradition that began with the Greeks themselves and culminated with the Roman worldview and the echoes of that Empire's influence that still reverberate today. Quite simply, the theory that Dionysos' origins are Asiatic relies on the belief that he is a relatively young god in the Greek pantheon. He is mentioned rarely in Homer, and his myths always portray him as a latecomer. However, evidence of Dionysos' presence (or that of a direct precursor) on Crete as early as 1500 BCE was found at Ayia Irini on Keos, and the Linear B tablets discovered in Pylos on the Greek mainland both connect Crete and the mainland, and place Dionysos on the mainland under his own name. The tablets were discovered in the early twentieth century but were not deciphered until 1953. Even with concrete evidence of Dionysos' Greek origins, scholars were reluctant to shift their thought from Dionysos the newcomer to Dionysos the ancient Greek god. There had been a long tradition of considering Dionysos an interloper, likely because of his particular sphere of influence. Dionysos was not only the god of wine; he had come to represent all that was fluid, marginal, and frightening to civilized humanity. It was natural for him to be considered alien and new in myth and Greek thought. The problem is that the works of scholars from that time forward have taken that origin for granted. As Charles Seltman says, after considering the evidence of Dionysos coming to Greece from the sea somehow, in his 1960 work *The Twelve Olympians*: "The evidence that Dionysos' worship was brought

down by wandering devotees through Macedon and Thessaly to Boeotia, Delphi, Athens and beyond, is based, however, on a very sound tradition.” (Seltman, 163)<sup>1</sup>

Said claims that *Bakkhai* is proof of the European dread of the “threatening excesses of Oriental mysteries.” (Said, 56) It would be more accurate to say that the English translations of *Bakkhai* are proof of the Roman/European dread of the threatening excesses of Greek mysteries. Though the Greeks themselves were more comfortable attributing the cult and its mysteries to Dionysos’ “Eastern” origins, the fact is that these celebrations of marginality were their own.

From 509 B.C.E. with the establishment of the Roman Republic to the third century B.C.E. in which Greek art and literature began to spread to the Italian peninsula, the Roman people thought of themselves as simple, practical, and virtuous people. This identity was reinforced by stories of the people resisting the kings of Rome in the days before the Republic, such as Livy’s account of the Rape of Lucretia, who spurs her men to action against the corrupt princes and at the same time demonstrates her extreme (and ideal) level of virtue by committing suicide, even after she is assured that the rape was not her fault. In the third century B.C.E., as Livy is writing *Ab Urbe Condita* and the Roman Republic is consolidating power on the peninsula, Greek art and literature begin to make themselves known. The first Macedonian war, 214-205 B.C.E, and the conquest of the Greek colonies in Sicily mark the beginning of the Roman conquest of Greece. Meanwhile, Cato the Elder (also known as the Censor, with all the emotive meaning that implies), warned his son:

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Seltman’s simplistic analysis of the gods, see Farley, *Dionysos: The God Brings Moderation*, pp. 11-12.

...in hac artium sola evenit, ut cuicumque medicum se professo statim credatur, cum sit periculum in nullo mendacio maius. non tamen illud intuemur; adeo blanda est sperandi pro se cuique dulcedo. nulla praeterea lex, quae puniat inscitiam capitalem, nullum exemplum vindictae.

...while it is a good plan to dip into their literature, it is not worth while to make a thorough acquaintance with it. They are a most iniquitous and intractable race, and you may take my word as the word of a prophet, when I tell you, that whenever that nation shall bestow its literature upon Rome it will mar everything...<sup>2</sup>

Even Cato, however, cannot fully deny the value of the arts of the Greeks to the aims of the Romans.

According to Itamar Even-Zohar, in the forward to his *Papers on Historical Poetics*, “Literature is herein conceived of as a stratified whole, a polysystem, whose major opposition is assumed to be that of ‘high,’ or ‘canonized,’ versus ‘low,’ or ‘non-canonized,’ systems” (Even-Zohar, 7.) I propose that in order to fully comprehend the dynamic at the intersection of Greek and Roman culture in the centuries between the physical conquest of Greece and the colonization of Greek literature by the Roman perspective, a polysystems view is crucial. The Roman polysystem was “deficient,” to use Even-Zohar’s terminology, in the “high,” or “canonized” system of literature and needed the prestige that filling that deficient slot would bring. Enter the Greeks, who by the Hellenistic era “presented themselves as educators, but now as ‘the educators of all the world, of both Greeks and barbarians’” (Whitmarsh, 8). This was the same century as the construction of the library at Alexandria, “containing ‘all the books in the world’...an

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia*, 29.6. English translation by John Bostock.

attempt to construct prestigious cultural links back to the old Greek world...It was in Hellenistic Egypt that *paideia* [Greek education] first began to assume the task of creating cultural continuity (especially in situations where that continuity could not be taken for granted) that we see so visibly marked in Roman Greece” (Whitmarsh 8-9.) Even-Zohar himself uses the example of Greece and Rome when talking about prestige: “The reasons for prestige are various, as for instance, when a SLt is old and there is no established local literature to begin with. This was the position of Greek vs. Roman culture, and of both vs. all European literatures” (Even-Zohar, 49). The second half of that sentence is revealing, for in moving from Greek versus Roman to both versus all European literatures, Even-Zohar recognizes the product of the Roman colonization of Greek literature: a polysystem which includes both systems. Further, however, it is my contention that the Roman polysystem, as Lefevre describes the process, worked so that “...procedures from the inventory of certain polysystems are ‘transplanted’ into another one, where they can become ‘weapons’ in the struggle for the canonized position” (1979, 72). This struggle eventually left Greek literature with little identity but one that was yoked to the Roman Empire. In the later encounters, as Even-Zohar puts it, of “both vs. all European literatures,” Greek narratives would be told in Roman frameworks, with every Greek god given a Roman name and the Roman values at the forefront.

How do we know that the Roman polysystem struggled with the Greek for the canonized position? Let us answer this first by examining the attitude of several Roman writers, all writing within a few years of the beginning of Augustus’ reign in 27 B.C.E. In his dynamic translation of Plato’s *Politeia*, Cicero has his interlocutors express this

opinion about the Greeks, within a discussion about the rule of kings and the early (pre-Republic) Romans:

Scipio: ergo his annis quadringentis Romae rex erat?

Laelius: et superbus quidem.

Scipio: quid supra?

Laelius: iustissimus, et deinceps retro usque ad Romulum, qui ab hoc tempore anno sescentesimo rex erat.

Scipio: ergo ne iste quidem pervetus?

Laelius: minime, ac prope senescente iam Graecia.

Scipio: cedo, num, barbarorum Romulus rex fuit?

Laelius: si ut Graeci dicunt omnis aut Graios esse aut barbaros, vereor ne barbarorum rex fuerit; sin id nomen moribus dandum est, non linguis, non Graecos minus barbaros quam Romanos puto.

Scipio: atqui ad hoc de quo agitur non quaerimus gentem, ingenia quaerimus. si enim et prudentes homines et non veteres reges habere voluerunt, utor neque perantiquis neque inhumanis ac feris testibus.

*Scipio:* You say truly, and yet not four centuries have elapsed since there was a king in Rome.

*Laelius:* And he was a proud king.

*Scipio:* But who was his predecessor?

*Laelius:* He was an admirably just one; and, indeed, we must bestow the same praise on all his predecessors, as far back as Romulus, who reigned about six centuries ago.

*Scipio:* Even he, then, is not very ancient.

*Laelius:* No, he reigned when Greece was already becoming old.

*Scipio:* Agreed. Was Romulus, then, think you, king of a barbarous people?

*Laelius:* Why, as to that, if we are to follow the example of the Greeks, who say that all people are either Greeks or barbarians, I am afraid that we must confess that he was a king of barbarians; but if this name belong rather to manners than to languages, then I believe the Greeks were just as barbarous as the Romans.

*Scipio:* But with respect to the present question, we do not so much need to inquire into the nation as into the disposition. For if intelligent men, at a period so little remote, desired the governing of kings, you will confess that I am producing authorities that are neither antiquated, rude, nor insignificant.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From Cicero's *De Re Publica*, I.58, translation by Oliver J. Thatcher, edited by J. S. Arkenberg for the Ancient History Sourcebook. The translation is part of the public domain at this time.

This episode is significant for two reasons: First, Cicero is interested in establishing the fact that the ancient Greeks were no less primitive than the ancient Romans were: “If this name belong rather to manners than to languages, then I believe the Greeks were just as barbarous...” Second, Cicero, like Vergil after him, has used a Greek framework within which to make this claim: his translation of Plato’s *Politeia*, a text that, among other things, suggests that the ideal form of government is that of an enlightened monarch. Despite Cicero’s (sometimes inconsistent) support of the Roman Republic, the choice to translate *Politeia* and this excerpt is interesting, for it supports the narrative that the early Romans were good, wise, and simple men (“neither antiquated, rude, nor insignificant”) while attempting to raise them to the level of their Greek contemporaries in prestige: the early Roman kings were all just, “as far back as Romulus, who reigned about six centuries ago,” and as Greece was already ancient at that time, it really wasn’t so long ago at all.

Cicero also attempts to bring Roman thought to the prestige level of Greek thought in his *Tusculan disputations*, choosing the Latin language for his philosophizing and arguing for the superiority of Roman ethics and warfare. In fact, he uses the language of conquest in reference to Greek writings: “our thinkers have always either discovered theories for themselves in a wiser way than the Greeks, or improved upon the things they have *taken over*.”<sup>4</sup>

Cicero is clear...that Greek culture is useful and acceptable only when it is dominated by Roman power, not vice versa: hence the necessity of a lengthy preamble that celebrates the superiority of Roman achievements, prior to any statement of allegiance to Hellenic values. Between Romans, Greek *paideia* must always appear the object of socio-economic

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Whitmarsh, 12.



exploitation, not (solely) of veneration: it only has value (in both the mercantile and the aesthetic senses) when it is taken over from its native context and resited in Roman's agonistic market of elite *ambitio*. (Whitmarsh, 13-14)

Cicero himself is one of the first and strongest of those who introduced and resited Greek *paideia* in the Roman context, simply in his role as translator of many Greek works. It is through him, for example, that Augustine has his understanding of Plato.

Another Roman writer in this era who weighs in on the Greek question is Horace. In a letter written to Augustus himself at the same time that Vergil was composing the *Aeneid*, expounds on the merit of Roman poetry, and warns against preferring Greek poetry simply because it is older:

Interdum uolgens rectum uidet, est ubi peccat.  
Si ueteres ita miratur laudatque poetas  
ut nihil anteferat, nihil illis comparet, errat;  
si quaedam nimis antique, si pleraque dure  
dicere credit eos, ignaue multa fatetur,  
et sapit et mecum facit et Ioue iudicat aequo.

Sometimes the populace see right; sometimes they are wrong. If they admire and extol the ancient poets so as to prefer nothing before, to compare nothing with them, they err; if they think and allow that they express some things in an obsolete, most in a stiff, many in a careless manner; they both think sensibly, and agree with me, and determine with the assent of Jove himself.<sup>5</sup>

At this point, there were many Roman notables whose love for Greek literature bordered on the traitorous, as far as men like Cato were concerned, and Horace is clearly invested here in bringing Greek literature down from its pedestal, while at the same time

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<sup>5</sup> From Horace's *Epistulae*, II, 63-68. English translation by Christopher Smart.

admitting its value. One of the ways in which he does this is to remind his readers that the Greeks had been conquered by Rome.

Graecia capta ferum uictorem cepit et artes  
intulit agresti Latio; sic horridus ille  
defluxit numerus Saturnius, et graue uirus  
munditiae pepulere; sed in longum tamen aeuum  
manserunt hodieque manent uestigia ruris.  
Serus enim Graecis admouit acumina chartis  
et post Punica bella quietus quaerere coepit,  
quid Sophocles et Thespis et Aeschylus utile ferrent.  
Temptauit quoque rem si digne uertere posset,  
et placuit sibi, natura sublimis et acer;  
nam spirat tragicum satis et feliciter audet,  
sed turpem putat inscite metuitque lituram.

Captive Greece took captive her fierce conqueror, and introduced her arts into rude Latium. Thus flowed off the rough Saturnian numbers, and delicacy expelled the rank venom: but for a long time there remained, and at this day remain traces of rusticity. For late [the Roman writer] applied his genius to the Grecian pages; and enjoying rest after the Punic wars, began to search what useful matter Sophocles, and Thespis, and Aeschylus afforded: he tried, too, if he could with dignity translate their works; and succeeded in pleasing himself, being by nature [of a genius] sublime and strong; for he breathes a spirit tragic enough, and dares successfully; but fears a blot, and thinks it disgraceful in his writings.<sup>6</sup>

As Tim Whitmarsh notes, in the first line: *Graecia capta ferum uictorem cepit et artes intulit agresti Latio*, the expected object of *inferre* is not *artes*, but *signa* (military standards)

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<sup>6</sup> From Horace's *Epistulae*, II, 156-167. English translation by Christopher Smart.

or *arma* (military arms). What is to be understood is that Greek arts threaten the feral nature of the Romans (Whitmarsh, 15). In addition, we have here again the narrative of the simple, “rustic” Roman, who can enjoy Sophocles, Thespis, and Aeschylus, and even translate, for he has a “sublime and strong” nature, and a “spirit tragic enough,” and “dares successfully,” and yet retains an inferiority complex about such writing. He still “but fears a blot, and thinks it disgraceful in his writings.” Horace’s goal here is to abolish that feeling of inferiority in Roman writers.

It is clear from Horace’s letter that Greek literature had reached that point that Lefevere describes: “When the image of the original is no longer uniformly positive in the target culture, more liberties are likely to be taken in translation, precisely because the original is no longer considered a “quasi-sacred” text” (Lefevere 1992, 91).

Cato’s xenophobia was no flash in the pan. Another century after Vergil’s *Aeneid*, the attitude that caused him to predict that Greek literature would corrupt Rome from within could still be found among Roman writers. Juvenal, a writer of brutal, hyperbolic satire, spends the vast majority of Satire III maligning the Greeks:

quae nunc diuitibus gens acceptissima nostris  
et quos praecipue fugiam, properabo fateri,  
nec pudor obstabit. non possum ferre, Quirites,  
Graecam urbem. quamuis quota portio faecis Achaei?  
iam pridem Syrus in Tiberim defluxit Orontes  
et linguam et mores et cum tibicine chordas  
obliquas nec non gentilia tympana secum  
uexit et ad circum iussas prostare puellas.  
ite, quibus grata est picta lupa barbara mitra.

And now let me speak at once of the race which is most dear to our rich men, and which I avoid above all others; no shyness shall stand in my way. I cannot abide, Quirites, a Rome of Greeks; and yet what fraction of our dregs comes from Greece? The Syrian Orontes has long since poured into the Tiber, bringing with it its lingo and its

manners, its flutes and its slanting harp-strings; bringing too the timbrels of the breed, and the trulls who are bidden ply their trade at the Circus. Out upon you, all ye that delight in foreign strumpets with painted headdresses!<sup>7</sup>

Note here the similarities between this view of the (Eastern) Greek peoples as lazy, over-luxuriant, and past their prime, and the stereotypical European view of the East that Edward Said describes in *Orientalism*. In fact, the idea that the ancient Greeks had a polysystem worth appropriating while the modern ones are merely shells of their race's former greatness is also a common theme of the Orientalist. It's a shame Said was so absolute in his East-West line residing clearly with Greece on the Western side, for what he says clearly applies to them as well. Clearly, for the Romans the Greeks were part of the exotic, effete and corrupt East.

Greek *paideia* indeed became a weapon with which Roman polysystem could (and did, successfully), supplant the Greek polysystem as the canonized position. In addition, the Romans succeeded in constructing an identity for themselves that elevates their polysystem to that of the Greek, while substituting their interpretations of Greek literature for the original as their Empire grew and more of their citizens were unable to read Greek. Whenever we see the term Greco-Roman used, or observe the Roman gods' names used interchangeably for Greek gods' names, we see the effect of the Roman absorption of the Greek polysystem. We also see this effect in Western European views of Greek literature and translation choices, which I have argued elsewhere. As Lefevre states in the 1992 article from which I have quoted, by the eighteenth century there was a competition between French and British translators—

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<sup>7</sup> From Juvenal's *Saturae*, III, 58-66. English translation by G.G. Ramsay.

translators from the then-primary imperial powers—to determine which civilization was the more “true successor” to the “glory that was Greece.” The legacy of the Roman colonization of Greek literature is that each successive Western power has continued to claim that legacy, disregarding the effect that has on actually understanding Greek texts in a Greek context. Nowhere has that been more evident than in the history of one of the very texts Edward Said uses to point to the Greek attitude toward Asia as an example of the struggle between Western and Eastern polysystems: Euripides’ *Bakkhai*.

As stated earlier in this essay, Dionysos was an ancient Greek god whom the Greeks always considered new and foreign, as a result of his particular sphere of influence. As time went by, it was considered to be historical rather than symbolic truth. The Romans and the later European scholars would consider it to be absolute historical fact, “based on a very sound tradition,” as Seltman would say. This tradition continued into the twentieth century, from which I have gathered four major translations of Euripides’ *Bakkhai*. In them one can observe the emphasis on the Roman ideal of virtue rather than Greek. This can be best seen in the ways in which translators have translated the term *σώφρων* and its cognates. The roots of the word are *σῶς* and *φρήν*, safe and mind, respectively. Liddell and Scott define it as “of sound mind...sensible, discreet, wise...having control over the sensual desires, temperate, self-controlled, moderate, chaste, sober...” The best translation of the word in accordance with Greek values would be temperate or moderate, as they would better encompass the idea of safeminded as being controlled in many different ways, or, as Aristotle would say, of excellence being a mean between two extremes, whether those extremes refer to sexuality, consumption, emotion, or any other area in which moderation is called for.

The first instance of the word, in the form of *σωφρονεῖν* (in the infinitive form: to be safeminded), is in a speech Teiresias directs at Pentheus as a result of the latter's irrational anger at the appearance of Dionysos and his subsequent maddening of the women of Kadmos' household, including his mother, Agauë.

**Selection 1 (lines 314-318: Teiresias)**

*οὐχ ὁ Διόνυσος σωφρονεῖν ἀναγκάσει  
 γυναικας ἐς τὴν Κύπριν, ἀλλ' ἐν τῇ φύσει  
 [τὸ σωφρονεῖν ἔνεστιν εἰς τὰ πάντ' ἄει]*  
 always]

*τοῦτο σκοπεῖν χρὴ· καὶ γὰρ ἐν βακχεύμασιν*  
 revelry  
*οὔσ' ἢ γε σώφρων οὐ διαφθαρήσεται.<sup>8</sup>*  
 destroyed

**Literally:**

not Dionusos to be safeminded compels  
 women in the Kuprian, but in the nature  
 [to be safe-minded she is able in all things

this to consider it is necessary; even for in bakkhic

being she who is indeed safeminded will not be

**With appropriate English syntax:**

Dionysos does not compel women to be safe-minded  
 With respect to the Kuprian, but it is in her nature  
 [To be able to be safeminded in all things always].  
 It is necessary to consider this; for even in Bakkhic  
 Revelry she who is indeed safeminded will not be destroyed.

The translators I have chosen to compare in this study are Gilbert Murray, who translated his *Bacchae* in 1901; Philip Vellacott, who translated his in 1954; Geoffrey S. Kirk, published 1970; and Reginald Gibbons, who translated his *Euripides Bakchai* in 2001. Their translations of this particular selection are as follows:

**Murray (1910):**

Thou fearest for the damsels? Think thee now;  
 How toucheth this the part of Dionyse  
 To hold maids pure perforce? In them it lies,  
 And their own hearts; and in the wildest rite  
 Cometh no stain to her whose heart is white.

**Vellacott (1954):**

...Dionysus will not compel

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<sup>8</sup> This and all other Greek text has been taken from E.R. Dodds' edition of *Euripides Bacchae*, published 1960 by Oxford University Press.

Women to be chaste, since in all matters self-control  
Resides in our own natures. You should consider this;  
For in the Bacchic ritual, as elsewhere, a woman  
Will be safe from corruption if her mind is chaste.

In 1960 E.R. Dodds published his edition of the Greek text, on which certainly Gibbons  
and probably Kirk relied. In his notes he includes this rough translation:

It is not Dionysus' part to force chastity on  
Women: you must look for that (the moral  
Factor) in human character; for even in the  
Ecstatic rite the pure will not lose her purity.

**Kirk (1970):**

It is not Dionysus who will force women to be virtuous  
In the realm of Cypris, but one must watch for this  
In their own nature; for even amid bacchic celebrations  
The woman who is truly virtuous will not be corrupted.

**Gibbons (2001):**

It's not for Dionysos to compel  
Women to modesty and self-control  
In matters of Aphrodite, for modesty  
With respect to everything lies in their nature.  
Consider that even in the Bakkhic revels  
A woman of true self-control will not  
Be corrupted.

Murray is interested in rendering a poetic translation. He chooses to use archaic English  
and manipulates the meaning for the sake of rhyme. The translation of *σωφρονεῖν* in  
terms of "purity" is problematic from both a feminist perspective and with respect to the  
meaning of this selection and the play as a whole. Vellacott, with his use of "chaste",  
Kirk, with his use of "virtuous", and Dodds' use of "purity" all betray this bias.

Gibbons' use of "modesty" is also troublesome. It seems to betray the  
Roman/Christian fear of the loss of feminine virtue, which is not as pronounced in the  
Greek, though it is clearly part of the matter at hand. In fact, while Greek society feared  
the sexually liberated female, it did not have the same concept of purity and virginity,  
specifically, that the Romans and later Western Europeans would have. Greek has no

definite word for “virgin.” Our word comes from the Latin *virgo*, but the Greek *παρθένος* merely meant maiden, or unmarried girl.<sup>9</sup> In addition, all translations but Gibbons’ and mine render the name of *Διόνυσος* as Dionysus, except Murray who changes it to Dionyse to make it rhyme with lies. Dionysus is the Roman/Latin transliteration, and immediately betrays the Roman perspective, which looks with horror on such activities as Dionysos’s followers, both the true and the mad (which they would conflate, and have) engage in. Historically, Bacchus was considered a foreign god and his cult was banned in 186 BCE due to “Roman conservatism in religious matters and aversion to orgiastic religious practices...” (Lewis and Reinhold, 503) However, the true followers of Dionysos in the play, the chorus of Bakkhai, shrink from the irrationality and violence of the members of Kadmos’ household who have been driven mad as a form of punishment and made to simulate the Bakkhic revels as a form of instruction. Observe the warning of the Chorus of Bakkhai when Pentheus will not listen to reason from Kadmos and Teiresias:

**Selection 2: (lines 387-402: Chorus)**

*ἀχαλίνων στομάτων  
 ἀνόμου τ’ ἀφροσύνας  
 τὸ τέλος δυστυχία·  
 ὁ δὲ τᾶς ἡσυχίας  
 βίотος καὶ τὸ φρονεῖν  
 ἀσάλευτόν τε μένει καὶ  
 συνέχει δῶματα· πόρσω  
 γὰρ ὅμως αἰθέρα ναίων-  
 τες ὄρῶσιν τὰ βροτῶν οὐρανίδαί.  
 Οὐρανός.  
 τὸ σοφὸν δ’ οὐ σοφία  
 τό τε μὴ θνητὰ φρονεῖν.  
 βραχὺς αἰὼν· ἐπὶ τούτῳ*

**Literally:**

of unbridled mouths  
 and lawless senselessness  
 the end unfortunate;  
 but the one calmness  
 life and thinking  
 tranquil both remains and  
 holds together house; far away  
 for nevertheless ether dwell-  
 ing they see the of mortals sons of  
 Ouranos.  
 and the wise thing is not wisdom  
 the and not-mortal thinking.  
 short lifetime; to that

<sup>9</sup> See L-S, though it was later understood to mean “virgin” as it was the word used in the New Testament to refer to Mary, the masculine noun *ὁ παρθένης* meant “son of a *παρθένης*!”



δέ τις ἄν μεγάλα διώκων  
τὰ παρόντ' οὐχὶ φέροι. μαι-  
νομένων οἶδε τρόποι καὶ  
κακοβούλων παρ' ἔμοι-  
γε φωτῶν.

someone if too much chasing  
those things being above he will not bear.  
of mad ones these ways and  
of ill-advised to me  
indeed of men.

**With appropriate English syntax:**

For unbridled mouths/and lawless senselessness/the end is unfortunate;  
but the life and thinking /of one who is calm/both stays tranquil and/holds together the  
house; for far away the ether-dwelling/sons of Ouranos nevertheless/see the sons of  
mortals.

And what is wise is not wisdom/nor is thinking non-mortally.  
Short is a lifetime; because of this/if someone were to chase too much the  
things above him he could not bear it./These are the ways of madmen and  
of those men ill-advised indeed/it seems to me.

**Murray (1910):**

Loose thy lips from out the rein;/Lift thy wisdom to disdain;  
Whatso law thou canst not see,/Scorning; so the end shall be/Uttermost calamity!

'Tis the life of quiet breath,/'Tis the simple and the true,/Storm nor earthquake  
shattereth,

Nor shall aught the house undo/Where they dwell. For, far away,  
Hidden from the eyes of day,/Watchers are there in the skies,  
That can see man's life, and prize/Deeds well done by things of clay.  
But the world's Wise are not wise,/Claiming more than mortal may.  
Life is such a little thing;/Lo, their present is departed,  
And the dreams to which they cling/Come not. Mad imagining

Theirs, I ween, and empty-hearted!

**Vellacott (1954):**

The brash unbridled tongue,/The lawless folly of fools, will end in pain.  
But the life of wise content/Is blest with quietness, escapes the storm  
And keeps its house secure./Though blessed gods dwell in the distant skies,  
They watch the ways of men./To know much is not to be wise.  
Pride more than mortal hastens life to its end;/And they who in pride pretend  
Beyond man's limit, will lose what lay/Close to their hand and sure.  
count it madness, and know no cure can mend/The evil man and his evil way.

**Kirk (1970):**

Of unbridled mouths/and lawless folly/the result is misfortune;/but the peaceful life  
and sanity/remain unshaken and/hold the house together; for far away  
though they dwell in the upper air/the heavenly ones behold the affairs of men.  
Cleverness is not wisdom,/nor is thinking thoughts that are not mortal.  
Life is short; this being so,/who would pursue great things  
and not bear with what is at hand? These/are the ways of madmen and

men of evil counsel, at least/in my judgement.

**Gibbons (2001):**

Mouths unbridled and/Folly flaunting the law /End in misfortune,

But a life of calm/And of wise thinking/Will not be  
Wrecked by storms,/And will keep/The household safe and whole.  
For even though the gods dwell so far/Away in the air of heaven, they

See what mortals do./Intellect is not wisdom./And to think in a manner

Not right for mortals means/Life will be short. Who/Would pursue great things

If doing so meant losing what/Is already his?  
That is the way, as I see it,/And bad counsel, of madmen.

Again Murray's emphasis on the poetic, in my opinion, is too expensive, as the meaning of the selection gets buried in the niceties of his language. It also seems to over-stress the dichotomy between heavenly and earthy wisdom especially when he foreshadows the God's law by referring to the law "thou canst not see" in line 388. Before Euripides even mentions that the Gods are watching, he simply argues for a life (and thinking) of calmness, echoing the theme of safemindedness. This is lost in Murray's translation.

Vellacott, in what seems to be an attempt to maintain the paucity of words in the Greek, loses cogency. The "life of wise content" seems disconnected from the "blessed gods" and "the evil man and his evil way" does not seem to refer to any antecedent. Kirk's translation is better, except for the mistake of reading *τις* for *τις*, thus turning line 398 into a question. Gibbons does the same, and also reads *κακοβούλων* as a noun rather than an adjective modifying *φωτῶν*, which makes more sense.

The bias, as I see it, is that the tradition was to consider this play as Said puts it, "the most Asiatic of Attic dramas" (56), and assuming the complicity of the Chorus of Asian Bakkhai in the activities of the Theban mad-women, the themes of Greek safe-

mindedness and the point to be made here that Pentheus' hubris will justly bring about the punishment of the god are glossed over.

**Selection 3: (line 504)**

*Δι: ἀὐδῶ με μὴ δεῖν σωφρονῶν οὐ σώφροσιν.*

**Literally:** Di: I say me not to tie safeminded to not safeminded.

**With appropriate English syntax:** I say, safeminded, to one not safeminded: do not tie me.

The Greek uses *σωφρονεῖν* twice, as do I. I believe the word is emphasized greatly in the repetition.

**Murray:**

*DIONYSUS: I charge ye, bind  
me not! I having vision and ye blind!*

This version does not even refer to mind, but only to sight.

**Vellacott:**

*DIONYSUS [to the GUARDS]: Don't bind me, I warn you.  
[To PENTHEUS] I am sane, and you are mad.*

Not only is this separation of Dionysos' speech not in the Greek, Vellacott changes the English word from sane to mad, as opposed to sane and not sane, which would retain the emphasis inherent in using the same word twice.

**Kirk:**

*DIONYSUS I tell you not to bind me—I who am sane, you who are not!*

Again, there is some loss of emphasis in this translation, as well as the direction of the telling, from sane to not-sane.

**Gibbons:**

*DIONYSOS I tell all of you: don't bind me—I am sane and you are not.*

This translation seems to call both Pentheus and his guards insane, which again loses the

impact of the dichotomy in the Greek and the emphasis on Pentheus' unsafe behavior,  
by again not repeating the word.

**Selection 4: (lines 640-641: Dionysos)**

*ῥαδίως γὰρ αὐτὸν οἴσω, κἂν πνέων ἔλθῃ μέγα.  
πρὸς σοφοῦ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς ἀσκεῖν σώφρον' εὐοργησίαν.*

**Literally:**

Easily for him I will endure, even if breathing he should come great things.  
To the wise for man to train safeminded gentle-temper.

**With appropriate English syntax:**

For I will endure him easily, even if he should come breathing great things.  
It is safeminded for the wise man to train a gentle-temper.

**Murray:**

I will endure him gently, though he come in fury hot,  
For still are the ways of Wisdom, and her temper  
trembleth not!

**Vellacott:**

...For all his rage, he shall not  
ruffle *me*.  
It's a wise man's part to practise a smooth-tempered  
self-control.

**Kirk:**

In any case I shall take him lightly, even if he comes breathing  
arrogance;  
for it is the quality of a wise man to exercise restrained good  
temper.

**Gibbons:**

...But even if he still is blowing hard,  
I will endure him easily, because a man  
Who is wise has self-control and gentleness of temper.

Again, Murray's poetry almost demands the personification of Wisdom, which  
clouds the theme of safe-mindedness again. Vellacott makes it an issue of personal pride  
for Dionysos to remain un"ruffled", Kirk is closer, then misses the point entirely by  
leaving out a translation of *σώφρον'*. Gibbons is closest in this selection, but the

inconsistency of the translation of *σώφρων* is disappointing throughout all the translations.

Finally, when Dionysos appears as the *deus ex machina*, and explains the reasons for his actions to the house of Kadmos, he says:

**Selection 5: (lines 1340-1343: Dionysos)**

ταῦτ' οὐχὶ θνητοῦ πατρὸς ἐκγεγώς λέγω  
Διόνυσος, ἀλλὰ Ζηνός· εἰ δὲ σωφρονεῖν  
safeminded  
ἔγνωθ', ὅτ' οὐκ ἠθέλετε, τὸν Διὸς γόνον  
εὐδαιμονεῖτ' ἂν σύμμαχον κεκτημένοι.

**Literally**

these things not of mortal father born I say  
Dionusos, but of Zeus; if and to be

you had known, when not you wanted, the of Zeus child  
you would be prosperous battle-ally acquiring.

**With appropriate English syntax:**

I say these things born not of a mortal father  
but of Zeus, Dionysos; and if you had known to be safeminded,  
when you did not wish to, you would be prosperous now,  
having acquired the son of Zeus as battle-ally.

**Murray:**

Thus speaketh Dionysus, Son confessed  
Of no man but of Zeus! —Ah, had ye seen  
Truth in the hour ye would not, all had been  
Well with ye, and the Child of God your friend!

**Vellacott:**

I who pronounce these fates am Dionysus, begotten  
Not by a mortal father, but by Zeus. If you  
Had chosen wisdom, when you would not, you would  
have lived  
In wealth and safety, having the son of Zeus your friend.

**Kirk:**

All this I say as offspring of no mortal father  
but of Zeus—I, Dionysus. If you had recognized  
how to behave sanely, when you refused to, you would have had  
the son of Zeus as ally, and would not be happy.

**Gibbons:**

I, Dionysos, say these things as the child  
Not of a mortal father but of Zeus.  
If you had chosen to think rightly when  
You did not wish to, you'd be happy, now,  
Having gained as your ally the child of Zeus.

In this crucial explanation of the motivation of Dionysos, he stresses the important of learning to be *σώφρων*, safeminded, in order to follow the law of gods and men. Murray translates this crucial word as “knowing Truth”; Vellacott as wisdom, Kirk as “behaving sanely”, and Gibbons as “to think rightly”. The problem here is not necessarily in their respective translations, but in their inconsistency in translating this word, fundamental in the theme of the Greek virtue of *sophrosune* that pervades the text. To reiterate: Murray translates *σωφρονεῖν* in Selection 1 “to hold pure”; *σωφρονῶν οὐ σώφροσιν* in Selection 3 is “I having vision and ye blind!”; *σώφρον*’ in Selection 4 is Wisdom; and *σωφρονεῖν* in Selection 5 is “seen Truth”. For Vellacott, the forms of *σώφρων* are respectively translated “chaste,” “self-controlled,” “sane,” “self-control,” and “wisdom”; for Kirk, “virtuous,” “sane,” omitted, and “to behave sanely;” and for Gibbons, “modesty” and “self-control,” omitted, and “to think rightly.” The deemphasis of the concept of *sophrosune* as a fundamental Greek virtue indeed makes the play lose something in translation. The translations are not made to reflect the original Greek, giving the reader an opportunity to judge for himself what the Greek values were. Instead, the Roman virtues of seriousness, piety, self-control, chastity and purity were emphasized. While translation theory has been largely ignored by Classical scholarship, due to its age and traditional manner of translating, it is clear that Greek culture and literature was effected by the colonization of the Romans. Applying postcolonial strategies to Greek texts will only serve to open the eyes of scholars and readers alike to the relative strangeness and Eastern sensibility of Greek literature. For when Said included Greece in his archetype of “Western Europe,” he would have done better to include it with the “Oriental” cultures, but best to realize that no dividing lines between peoples and cultures are ever as definite as he would have us believe.

## CHAPTER 2 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

James Holmes argues convincingly in his article, “The Cross-Temporal Factor in Verse Translations,” that “...translators tend to deal with these cross-temporal problems in ways that are quite similar to the approaches of native speakers who are reading a non-contemporary poem” (1969, 36). In order to translate *Bakkhai* so that it retains its historical flavor, retains the deep symbolic meaning that Euripides intended, but is also less difficult for a non-Greek reader, I attempt what Holmes refers to as a “complex profile,” beyond the categorization of “modernizing” or “historicizing.” The profile of this particular translation may be called “adequate,” after Toury’s term for that which tends to adhere to the norms of the source language (SL), and “formal,” due to my interest in rendering consistently words of particular cultural value. The choice concerning the translation of *σώφρων* is at the rank of the word, as Catford (1965) would define it. This is not to say, however, that the entire translation is interested merely in meaning at the word level. The overall thematic meaning of the play, with its emphasis on the acquisition of the virtue of *σωφροσύνη* through the wisdom of recognizing the power and importance of Dionysos is inextricably linked to the translation of that word. The literal rendering of “safeminded” for *σώφρων* is one “formal” technique; others include maintaining the line numbers consistently—there are exactly the same amount of lines in the English as there are in the Greek—and a preference for the Greek word order when it’s syntactically possible. This is a difficult task. Greek is a language whose words are all pregnant with meaning and often require a number of English words just to express the full syntax of one word. For example, *ἀνακεκλήγγεν* is, has as its component parts “she/he,” for it is a third person singular verb, indicated by the  $-\epsilon(\nu)$

ending; is a completed action in the immediate past, indicated by the reduplication (κε) of the first sound of the root verb “κλάζω,” and the changing of the stem to “κλάγγ,” and the prefix “ανα” gives an intensified adverbial sense: very. In total, this one Greek word takes about five to translate to English: “He/she has just screamed intensely.”

Another translation choice I have made is to not translate certain words that are unique and specific to the cult of Dionysos: *thiasos* and *thyrsoi*, for example. The *thiasos* is the band of Dionysos’s worshippers, and the *thyrsoi* is the staff they bear for the god. It is often also rendered as a thyrsos or thyrsus. However, my preference is to adhere as closely as possible to the Greek spellings when transliterating, in the interest of distinguishing the original Greek spellings from the Romanized, familiar ones. Upsilon is rendered as *u*, except in Dionysos’ name, where a replacement of the *y* would make it almost unrecognizable. Words that end in omicron-sigma are rendered *-os*. The traditional *-us* ending are indicative of a Roman preference, where the nominative singular form of second declension masculine nouns ends in *-us* as they end in *-os* in the Greek. Moreover, the first declension plural nominative ending of *-ae* indicates a Latin bias as well; in Greek it’s *-ai*. Another spelling note is the use of *k* in every instance of kappa. Greek has sigma for the sound /s/ and kappa for /k/. Latin, on the other hand, uses *c* for /k/, and every Latin word spelled with a *k* is clearly a Greek borrowing. Therefore, the name of the play—**BAKXAI**—is rendered as *Bakkehai*, not *Bacchae*.

Greek drama was written in meter. The rhythm of daily speech was to be recalled in the iambic trimeter of the regular dialogue. The Choros, however, had a more highly structured meter, and sang their parts, usually organized into strophe, answering



antistrophe, and epode. This translation, focusing as it does on the rendition of symbolic language and consistent line numbering, does not attempt to translate the meter of the play. The meter of this translation is then more of a free verse. It should be recognizable as poetry, even if it has no consistent meter.

Ultimately, the goal of my translation of Euripides is to strip away the Roman interpretation of virtue, specifically by translating all forms of the asymmetrical concept *σώφρον* in the same way, and in a way that is literal, foreignizing, and slightly uncomfortable, so as to point the reader to every instance of it. In addition, I am interested in making choices about meaning that do not overemphasize the strangeness and violence of the Bakkhai—either the Choros or the madwomen on the mountain. In doing so, it is my hope that not only this wonderful play but also the complex culture from which it formed can be translated successfully.

This translation is based on the second edition of E.R. Dodds' text published in 1960, with cross-referencing of Gilbert Murray's manuscript published in 1913, via the Perseus Project. A number of lines are missing from all manuscripts, having been lost to time. Those lines are marked in the translation, and no attempt to reconstruct them has been attempted.

CHAPTER 3  
EURIPIDES' *BAKKHAI*

Dionysos:

I have come to this Theban land, child of Zeus, 1  
Dionysos; born here of the daughter of Kadmos  
Semelê, who gave birth in lightning-fire.  
Having exchanged shape of god for that of mortal,  
Here now at the river Dirکہ and the Ismenian waters.  
I see the memorial of my thunder-struck mother:  
Her home, near the palace, ruined  
By the smoking flames of Zeus which still burn—  
The immortal angry pride of Hera against my mother.  
I see that Kadmos made this place forbidden to feet,  
A shrine for his daughter; I shall cover it  
With new vine-shoots and grapes all over.

Leaving the golden lands of Lydia and Phrygia  
I came upon the sunburnt plains of Persia,  
The walls of Baktria, the dangerous ground  
Of the Medes, to Arabia, all of blessed Asia—  
Which lies alongside the briny sea  
With its beautiful, towering cities full  
Of a mix: Greeks and foreigners alike.  
There I went first, before a city of Greeks,  
Dancing there and establishing my rites  
So that I should show myself a god to men.

Thebes first of the Greek cities  
Have I spurred to rejoice, clothing them in fawnskin  
And giving them the thursos—the ivy-spear. 25  
For my mother's sisters—they at least *should* believe—  
Say Dionysos is not the son of Zeus  
But that Semelê was taken by some mortal  
And put the bed-blame on Zeus,  
(As Kadmos contrived<sup>10</sup>) and Zeus killed her,  
They gloat, because she lied about the marriage.

And so I have spurred them out of the house.  
Maddened, they inhabit the mountain, frenzied in mind.  
I compel them to wear my dress and keep my mysteries  
All the female seed of Thebes, all that are women,  
I have driven them mad and out of the house.

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<sup>10</sup> That is, Semelê's sisters are saying that Kadmos created and disseminated the story that Semelê was impregnated by Zeus in order to preserve the appearance of his daughter's virtue and Zeus killed her in punishment for the lie. This is generally held to be the truth of the incident by the city at large before Dionysos comes to town. Cf. Teiresias' comments at 314ff.

The daughters of Kadmos also—they mingle  
 Under the green pines and sit roofless under stone.  
 The city must learn this well, even unwilling,  
 Since they have been unwilling to dance my rites.  
 I must defend also Semelê, my mother,  
 By showing to mortals the god she bore to Zeus.  
 Kadmos now has given both power and status  
 To Pentheus, born of his daughter,  
 Who wars with the gods through me: from libations  
 He pushes me and in prayers pays me no mind.  
 And so for him I shall mark my godhood  
 And for all the Thebans. And in other lands,  
 After all is well established here, I will set out  
 And reveal myself; but if the city of Thebes  
 In anger, with weapons, tries to lead the Bakkhai  
 From the mountains, I will lead my mainads against them.  
 And so I have changed my form to mortal  
 And turned my shape into the quality of a man.

50

But, O you, my guard of Lydians who left Tmolos  
 My thiasos,<sup>11</sup> women, whom I brought from foreign lands  
 Companions and attendants mine,  
 Take up and sound in the city your Phrygian  
 Drums, sacred to mother Rhea and to me.  
 Go to the royal home of Pentheus there  
 And drum! So that the city of Kadmos sees.  
 I am off to the Bakkhai, to the slopes of Kithairon  
 Going where they are, I shall partake in the dance.

Choros:

From Asia-land  
 Having left holy Tmolos I hurry  
 For Bromios<sup>12</sup> sweet toil  
 Work, yet no work at all,  
 Crying Bakkhic euois!<sup>13</sup>

64

Who's in the road? Who's in the road? Who?  
 Those indoors, come out! All mouths  
 Shall be devoted to holy speech:  
 I shall forever sing  
 The hymns of Dionysos.

O  
 Happy, truly blessed the one  
 Who knows the god's rites

<sup>11</sup> This is the Greek term for Dionysos' band of revelers who march down streets singing and dancing.

<sup>12</sup> That is, Dionysos. As befits a god of fluidity, Dionysos has many names.

<sup>13</sup> *Euoi!* is the traditional ecstatic cry of the thiasos.

And lives a pious life  
And whose soul dances  
On mountains celebrating the mysteries  
Of the holy cleansing,

75

Following also the rites  
Of the great mother Kybele,<sup>14</sup>  
Shaking the thursos  
Crowned in ivy,  
That one honors Dionysos.

Come, Bakkhai, come Bakkhai  
Bromios god, son of god,  
Lead him down, Dionysos  
Out of Phrygia into Greece's  
Wide dancing-streets, bring  
Bromios!

Who  
When his mother's labor pains  
Were brought by Hera's force,  
Zeus' winged thunderbolts  
Threw him early from her womb  
He was born, she was dead-  
Losing her life in the flash of lightning.

Now, for another womb, Zeus  
Son of Kronos led him straight  
To a cavern in his thigh, hiding him,  
Sewn up with golden pins  
Secreted away from Hera.

He was born again, at the Fated  
Time, bull-horned god  
Crowned with a snakey  
Crown, which is why Mainads  
Hunt those wild-eaters and  
Thread them through their hair.

100

O Thebes, nourisher of Semelê,  
Crown yourself with ivy.  
Flourish, flourish with evergreen  
With yew and with beautiful fruit  
Join the Bakkhic dance, holding  
The young boughs of fir trees,

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<sup>14</sup> Also known as Cybele, this goddess is the Phrygian version of Mother Earth. Other Earth Mothers include Gaia, Rhea, and later, Demeter.

And wearing stippled fawnskin  
Surrounded with white locks  
Of wool. For the sake of your proud  
Bakkhic wands purify yourself. And then dance—  
For Bromios himself leads the thiasos.  
To the mountain, to the mountain!  
There waits the womanly mob  
Having been stung away from  
Distaff and loom by Dionysos.  
O sacred caves of the Kouretes<sup>15</sup>  
And most holy Zeus-rearing  
Kretan streams! Here in the caverns  
Triple-helmeted Korybantes  
Discovered this circle  
Of stretched hide for me!  
Into the Bakkhic beat  
They mixed the sweet-sounding  
Air of Phrygian flutes, and gave this gift  
To Mother Rhea, this crash of Bakkhic cries.  
Frenzied Satyrs from  
The Goddess Mother  
Supplied it to the dances  
We unite in every third year  
To the joy of Dionysos.

125

He is welcome in the mountains, whenever one  
Falls groundward in the swiftly running thiasos,  
Clad in the sacred fawnskin, holding fresh  
Goat-blood sacrifice, the favor of raw flesh,  
Onward into the mountains of Phrygia, Lydia,  
Bromios our leader!  
Euoi!  
The ground flows with milk, with wine,  
And with the nectar of bees  
Just as the smoke of Syrian incense  
Bakkhos holds up  
His flaming torch of pine  
He takes up the ivy-wand  
He runs, he dances  
Swaying, and urging  
The stragglng Bakkhants,  
Long hair tossed up to heaven.  
Amidst their shouts he roars out:  
Come Bakkhai,

150

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<sup>15</sup> *Kouretes* were male worshippers of Kybele/Rhea, who watched over Dionysos in his infancy on Crete, as they did for his father Zeus; conflated with the Phrygian *Korybantes*, their ecstatic dancing parallels that of the mainads.

Come Bakkhai,  
Revel in gold-streamed Tmolos  
Give praise to Dionysos  
To the sound of crashing drums  
Glorify the god of euois with euois!  
Crying with Phrygian cries,  
Whenever the melodious flute  
Sacred, sings its sacred notes  
Joined together they wander on the mountain.  
The mountain!

Just as a colt taking delight near its grazing mother,  
the Bakkhant raises her leg swiftly and with leaps.

- Teiresias:      Who's at the gates? Call Kadmos from his rooms,      170  
                         Agenor's son, who left Sidon-town,  
                         And raised this city of Thebes.  
                         Someone go, announce that Teiresias  
                         Seeks him; he knows why I have come:  
                         Planned with him have I, an even older elder,  
                         To tie fast the thursos, wear the skins of fawns  
                         And crown our heads with ivy-vines.
- Kadmos:        Ah, dearest, I knew, when I heard your voice—  
                         The wise voice of a wise man—that you were in the house;  
                         Here I am! Wearing the god's own dress;  
                         For we must (as he's the son of my own daughter,  
                         Dionysos, whom Zeus has made appear to men)  
                         Give him as much power as we can.  
                         Where shall we dance? Where set down our feet  
                         And shake our grizzled heads? Lead me,  
                         Teiresias, old man by old man; for you are wise.  
                         That way I'll not get tired, not by day or night,  
                         Of beating my thursos on the earth. How sweet it is!  
                         We have forgotten being old.
- Teiresias:      You feel these things just as I do;  
                         For even I feel young and shall try to dance.
- Kadmos:        Shall we travel up the mountain in a carriage?
- Teiresias:      No, that would not give sufficient honor to the god.
- Kadmos:        Shall this old man be your escort, old man?
- Teiresias:      The god will guide us both there without effort.
- Kadmos:        Are we the only ones to dance for Bakkhos in this city?

Teiresias: Only we think rightly; all the others wrongly.

Kadmos: Well, then let's go! Hold my hand.

Teiresias: Look, unite and join your hand with mine.

Kadmos: I would never look down upon the gods; I'm only human!

Teiresias: Nor shall we philosophize about the gods. 200  
 From our fathers we have acquired our traditions,  
 As old as time, and no argument can overthrow these things,  
 Whatever "wisdom" the highest minds have found.  
 Will someone say that I am shameful in old age,  
 Intending to dance, my head wreathed in ivy?  
 But the god does not discriminate: if we must dance,  
 Then it is a command for everyone, young or old.  
 From all in common he will have his honor;  
 In his account, he has no favorite.

Kadmos: Since, Teiresias, you're blind to daylight,  
 I'll narrate these events for you.  
 Pentheus there rushes out of the house,  
 Ekhion's son, whom I've made king.  
 How excited he is! What foolish thing will he say?

Pentheus: After traveling abroad I've reached this land;  
 And I'm hearing evil news about the city:  
 Our women have left their homes,  
 False Bakkhants, to rush to the thick  
 Shade of the mountains, honoring this new god,  
 Dionysos, whoever he is, with dancing.  
 Corrupted by the thiasos they set  
 Wine-jugs in their midst, sometimes  
 Slinking out into the wilds to serve the lusts of men,  
 Asserting they are Mainads, offering burnt flesh,  
 But obviously they place Aphrodite before Bakkhos. 225  
 Thus I have seized some, bound their hands--  
 The servants keep them safe and sound under public roofs.  
 Those left will be hunted down from the mountains:  
 Ino and Agauë, who bore me to Ekhion,  
 And Aktaion's mother, Autonoë.  
 Securing them in iron nets,  
 I'll stop this Bakkhic mischief right away!  
 They say some stranger has arrived,  
 A singing sorcerer from the Lydian land.  
 He has a fragrant head of golden curls,  
 Dark of eye, with the grace of Aphrodite,

From morning to resting time, he joins with young  
 Girls, initiating them--showing off his euoi!  
 If I catch sight of him, I'll take him from this place,  
 I'll stop the pounding of his thursos and  
 The shaking of his hair: I'll cut off his head!  
 He says Dionysos is a god,  
 That he was once sewn up in Zeus' thigh,  
 When instead he burnt up along with his mother  
 By Zeus' thunderbolt; she lied about being his wife.  
 Whoever this stranger is, does it not seem right,  
 To hang this blaspheming blasphemer till he dies?

But here's an astounding thing: the prophet Teiresias I see  
 In speckled fawn-skin? And the father of my mother—  
 Hysterical!—a Bakkhant with the wand?  
 I'm ashamed; the sight of you two, Grandfather,  
 Elders without any sense!  
 Come on, shake off that ivy. Let me  
 Take the thursos from your hand, Grandpa.  
 You're the instigator, Teiresias. You want  
 This new god accepted so you'll benefit from  
 New bird-examinations and burnt offerings.  
 If your grizzled old age did not save you,  
 You'd be sent down river with the rest,  
 For establishing these repulsive rites.  
 When women taste the wanton grape,  
 There's nothing proper in those feasts, nothing, I say.

250

Choros: What impiety! Stranger, would you shame the gods  
 And Kadmos who sowed the earthborn?<sup>16</sup>  
 Child of Ekhion, would you dishonor your kin?

Teiresias: Whenever a wise man makes a good start with words,  
 It is not difficult for him to speak well.  
 Your glib tongue makes you *appear* sensible  
 Perhaps in your words, but not in your sense.  
 Such a man, powerful only in his bold speech,

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<sup>16</sup> “[Kadmos] sent some of his men to fetch water from the spring of Ares, but a Dragon, said by many to be a child of Ares, guarded the spring and destroyed most of those who had been sent. In outrage Kadmos killed the dragon, and then, following the instructions of Athena, planted its teeth. From this sowing there sprang from the earth armed men, called Sown Men. These proceeded to kill each other, some in voluntary encounters, and others in ignorance. Pherekydes says that when Kadmos saw the armed men growing up from the earth, he threw stones at them, and they, believing that they were being hit by each other, started their fight.

However, five of them survived, Ekhion, Oudaios, Khthonios, Hyperenor, and Peloros. As for Kadmos, to atone for the deaths he served Ares as a laborer for an ‘everlasting’ year, for a year then was equal to eight years now ... And to Kadmos were born daughters, Autoñoë, Ino, Semelë Agauë ... and Agauë was married to Ekhion.” - *Apollodorus, The Library* 3.22



Makes a terrible citizen, having no intelligence.

This new god whom you mock,  
I cannot even express the importance  
He will have for Greece. For there are two, 275  
Young man, primal things for men: Demeter,  
The earth goddess, call her what you like,  
She initiated men into the dry goods: grain.  
Next, the son of Semelê, found and offered  
The fundamental wet good: drink, from grapes,  
Equally important to mortals. It stops our pain.  
When we are filled with vine-juice sleep  
And escape from the day's evils follow.  
Nor is there any other cure for troubles.  
Himself a god, he is poured in libation to the gods,  
So that through him men have pleasant times.  
And you ridicule him for being sewn  
Into Zeus' thigh? I'll explain how great this is:  
When Zeus snatched him from the thunder-fire  
And led the newborn to Olympos as a god,  
Hera wanted to ban him from heaven;  
But Zeus contrived, just like a god:  
Breaking off a piece of earth-circling ether,  
He formed this "high" stuff into a double,  
And gave it to Hera. In time, men have come to say  
That he was "sewn in the thigh"  
But really he was "shown from the high"—  
That is, to Hera, and that explains it.

A prophet this god is, for being both Bakkhic  
And mad give prophetic power, 300  
And whenever the god is present in body  
He makes the drunken-mad speak the future.  
He also shares in Ares' realm  
For an army of hoplites all in formation  
May fly in fright before touching their spears.  
That madness is Dionysos' as well.  
You'll even see him on the rocks of Delphi  
Stepping on the twin peaks among the pines  
Swaying and swinging his Bakkhic staff,  
Great among the Greek gods. Listen to me,  
Pentheus, don't boast that you have power,  
If you believe that, you must realize you are sick  
To imagine you are wise. Admit him to the land,  
Make an offering, dance, and crown your head.

Dionysos cannot compel women to be safeminded  
About Aphrodite if it's their nature already

To be safeminded in all things. You must  
Understand this. For she who is safeminded  
Will not be ruined, even in the midst of Bakkhic revelry.

You know, you rejoice whenever the people  
Crowd the gates and the city exults in Pentheus.  
*[gesturing to Mount Kitbairon]*  
He, I think, also enjoys being honored.  
Therefore, your grandfather (the one you mock)  
And I will adorn ourselves with ivy; we will dance.  
A couple of gray-heads we are, dancers all the same,  
I will not declare war on a god; you haven't convinced me. 325  
For you are most grievously mad, and there's no cure  
Nor drugs you can take to stop this sickness.

Choros: Elder, you do not dishonor Phoibos<sup>17</sup> with such words;  
You are safeminded to honor the great god Bromios.

Kadmos: Child, Teiresias gives you good advice.  
Live like us and don't throw the law out the door.  
For now your mind flits about, and isn't mindful.  
Even if he's not a god, as you claim, call him a god.  
What do you care? Tell this lie for a good cause,  
So that Semelê will appear to have birthed a god here,  
And you will have brought honor to your family.  
You know the infamous fate of Akteon,<sup>18</sup>  
Who was torn apart by his own fierce dogs  
Because he boasted in the meadows that he was  
More powerful in hunting than Artemis!  
Don't let that happen to you too! Let me  
Wreath you in ivy. Join us! Honor the god!

Pentheus: Don't touch me. Go dance your Bakkhic revels,  
But don't spread your silliness on me. I'll give  
This teacher of your folly some justice.  
Someone, march to the wall,  
Go to where he has his augury-seat  
Overturn it with bars; flip it backward with tridents  
Mix all that foolishness up in a pile,  
And release his head-wreaths to the stormy winds. 350  
For that is the best way to bite him back.

*[Gesturing to attendants]*

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<sup>17</sup> Phoibos/Phoebus Apollo is traditionally thought in opposition to Dionysos, cf. Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*.

<sup>18</sup> Pentheus' cousin, another of Kadmos' grandsons, who was punished by Artemis for hubris in much the same way Pentheus will be punished by Dionysos for the same crime.

You, go through the city and track down  
This womanly foreigner who carries new disease  
To our women and pollutes our beds!  
And if you take him, bring him here chained  
So that he may die by stoning, after seeing  
The most unwelcoming Bakkhic dance in Thebes!

Teiresias: Wretched man, you don't know what you are saying.  
You are truly insane now; before you were just  
Out of your mind. Let us go, Kadmos, and ask the god,  
For the sake of both Pentheus—though he is beastly—  
And the city, that he do nothing untoward.  
Join me with your ivy-covered Bakkhic staff  
Try to hold up my body, as I will do for you.  
For two old men to fall would be shameful. Still,  
We must go, for we must be slaves to the god, to Bakkhos.  
Let Pentheus<sup>19</sup> not bring sorrow to your house,  
Kadmos; I am not speaking as prophet, but as  
An observer of facts. For the fool speaks utter foolishness.

*[Exeunt]*

Choros: Reverence, queen of gods  
Reverence, o'er the earth  
You bear golden wings.  
Do you hear Pentheus?  
No reverence hear you,  
But hubris towards Bromios,  
Towards Semelê's son, first  
Among the blessed gods for beautifully-  
Crowned joy. These are his:  
To bring the dancers to the thiasos  
And to laugh with them,  
To lessen our cares.  
Whenever bright grapes come  
To be shared by the gods,  
The cup gives sleep to  
Ivy-wreathed men in revelry.

375

For unbridled mouths  
And unlawful mindlessness  
The end is unfortunate.  
But he who has calm  
In both life and mind  
Keeps his house  
Peaceful and whole.

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<sup>19</sup> Pentheus/πένθος literally means grief, sadness, or sorrow.

For although they dwell in heaven  
The heavenly see mortal things.  
Mortal wisdom is not true wisdom  
And it is not wise to think we are immortal.<sup>20</sup>  
Short is life; someone seeking  
Too high could stand to live  
No longer. Those are  
The ways of madmen  
And the ill-advised, it seems to me.

400

For Kupros<sup>21</sup> let me leave now  
Island of Aphrodite  
There sweet-minded Erotes<sup>22</sup>  
Give themselves to earthly ones.  
The hundred-mouthed rivers  
Nourish the rainless Paphos  
From the Eastern stream.  
Or for most lovely Pieria,  
Seat of the muses, holy  
The hillside of Olympos,  
Bromios, Bromios, bring me there  
Bakkhic leader, euoic god!  
There the Graces  
There Pothos, there the law  
To dance the Bakkhic dance!

The god the son of Zeus  
Delights in revelry,  
He loves bliss-giving Peace,  
Goddess of safe-raised sons.  
He ensures the blessed and  
The wretched both receive  
The painless joy of wine;  
He hates the careless one  
Who doesn't celebrate  
By day or friendly night  
Or keep a prudent heart  
Inside past clever men's reach.  
Crowds do what's easiest,  
And that I accept  
As my oracle.

425

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<sup>20</sup> The paradox of this is a central theme of the play: the mortal hubris of Pentheus, thinking he has the definitive answers about the nature of the immortal Dionysos.

<sup>21</sup> Cypress is the traditional home of Aphrodite.

<sup>22</sup> *Erotes* is the plural of *Eros* (Roman Cupid). Traditions varied, but the *erotes* often appeared in pairs or triads: *Eros* (love), *Himeros* (desire) and *Pothos* (passion): see line 415. For the Greeks they were young, winged men. Later, they would be seen as the traditional winged putti.

Attendant: Pentheus, we are here, having hunted the prey  
You sent us for, and it was not unfruitful.  
Yet this beast was submissive to us and did not try  
To flee on foot, nor was he pale, but still wine-flushed  
He gave his hands not unwillingly.  
Laughing, he let us bind and lead him,  
And standing still, readily handed himself over.  
I, in shame, said: "Stranger, not willingly  
Do I lead you; Pentheus sent me with the commands."  
And those Bakkhai that you took—  
The ones you snatched, bound, and placed under the public roofs—  
They're gone! Loosened to return to the meadows,  
They are calling upon Bromios as a god.  
On their own the bindings left their feet  
Locks, doors opened by no human hand.  
*[He indicates D.]*  
This man, full of wonders has he come to Thebes!  
But now, he's your concern.

450

Pentheus: Untie his hands. Now that he's in my net  
He's not so swift and he can't flee.  
But your body's not bad, stranger,  
Or so it appears to women, to those in Thebes.  
Your locks are long; they're no wrestler's  
Flowing down your cheek, full of longing—  
You have worked to make your skin white,  
Not wounded by the sun, but under shadows  
You worship Aphrodite in beauty.  
First then, tell me who you are.

Dionysos: No one of consequence; it's easy to tell.  
You've heard of flowering Mount Tmolos?

Pentheus: I know it; it rings Sardis in an embrace.

Dionysos: I'm from there. Lydia's my fatherland.

Pentheus: How is it that you bring these rites to Greece?

Dionysos: Dionysos initiated us, the son of Zeus.

Pentheus: Do you have a Zeus there who sires new gods?

Dionysos: No, he joined with Semelê in marriage here.

Pentheus: By night did he instruct, or by open eyes?

Dionysos: Seeing and seen, he gives us the mysteries.

Pentheus: And these mysteries of yours—what are they like?

Dionysos: That's indecent for you, an un-Bakkhic mortal, to know.

Pentheus: What good is it for the celebrants?

Dionysos: That's unlawful to hear, though it's worth knowing.

Pentheus: Oh, you're so tricky. Now I want to hear it. 475

Dionysos: Persist in impiety and you will *bate* the mysteries of this god.

Pentheus: Since you say you clearly saw the god, what sort was he?

Dionysos: Whatever sort he wished; I did not decide it.

Pentheus: There you go again! You're good at saying nothing.

Dionysos: A wise man talking seems stupid to one who doesn't think.

Pentheus: Have you first come here, bringing your god?

Dionysos: All the foreigners already dance his mysteries.

Pentheus: Well, they're defective thinkers compared to Greeks.

Dionysos: In fact they think much better. Their customs are just different.

Pentheus: Do you celebrate these rites by day or night?

Dionysos: Night's better; shadows give solemnity.

Pentheus: They're treacherous and unsafe for women.

Dionysos: Yet some find shame even in daylight.

Pentheus: You must pay for your arrogant mouth.

Dionysos: And you for your impiety and sins against the god.

Pentheus: How bold this Bakkhos and not unathletic with words!

Dionysos: Tell what I must suffer. What terrible thing will you do to me?

Pentheus: First I'll cut this pretty hair of yours.

Dionysos: My locks are sacred. I grow them for the god.

Pentheus: Then give me that thursos from your hands.

Dionysos: Take it yourself. For Dionysos I bear it.

Pentheus: In prison, inside, we will guard that body.

Dionysos: The god himself will loose me, whenever I decide.

Pentheus: When the Bakkhai are at your back, you mean.

Dionysos: He's here now, seeing what I suffer. 500

Pentheus: Then where is he? He's not visible to my eyes.

Dionysos: Where I am. You have sinned against him so you cannot see.

Pentheus: Seize him! He insults both me and Thebes!

Dionysos: I, safeminded, tell you, unsafeminded: do not bind me.

Pentheus: *I say bind him! I have the authority here!*

Dionysos: You don't know why you live, nor what you do, nor who you are.

Pentheus: I am Pentheus, son of Agauë, sired by Ekhion.

Dionysos: You are destined to be unlucky with such a name.

Pentheus: Get out. Shut him up in the nearby stable,  
 With the horses, so he may gaze at the shadowy night.  
*[Turning to Dionysos]*  
 Dance *there*. And these women you have led here:  
 They are just as wicked! We will either sell them off  
 Or I'll take them myself as slaves. Either way,  
 I'll stop this clash and din of hand upon the skin!

Dionysos: I go, for whatever must not will not be suffered.  
 But you! Dionysos—that one you say does not exist—  
 Will indeed bring punishment upon you for this outrage.  
 For when you bind us, you do wrong to him.  
*[Exeunt]*

Choros: Daughter of Akhelous<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Several rivers went by this name; the reference may be a general one to rivers or waters.

Blessed maiden, Lady Dirکہ—  
Once you took into your streams  
Zeus’s infant son  
Snatched from his own undying fire  
Zeus then placed the child  
Into his thigh, crying:  
“Go, Dithyrambos, into this  
My male-womb go  
And I will reveal you O Bakkhos,  
To be named thus to Thebes.”  
But you, O great Dirکہ,  
You push us away from you,  
As we bring you the crowned thiasos.  
Why? Why spurn us? Why flee us?  
Yet, by the grace of Dionysos’  
Grape-laden wine, I swear,  
You will give a thought to Bromios.

525

Oh, such anger it is  
That bursts forth  
From earthborn Pentheus,  
Seed of dragons  
Planted by earthborn Ekhion.  
A wild-faced monster, no  
Human sight but bloody, just as  
The giants—also god-fighters—are.  
Soon we’ll be in his nets  
Because we’re joined with Bromios.  
Already he holds our thiasos-leader  
Inside, in darkness, hidden, imprisoned.  
Do you see this, O Dionysos  
Son of Zeus, your people  
In conflict with tyranny?  
Come, lord, shaking your golden thursos,  
down from Olympos, you will restrain  
The hubris of this bloody, bloody man.

550

Where are you Dionysos? Where?  
Upon brute-nourishing Nysa?  
Assembling the thiasos?  
Or on the highest peak of the Korykian?<sup>24</sup>  
Perhaps, then, down from Olympos,  
Of the thick cave-like trees,  
From where Orpheus, playing his lyre,  
Gathers the trees with his music and

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<sup>24</sup> “The Korykian” is a reference to Corycia or Korykia, a Naiad who lived on Mount Parnassus in Phocis



Gathers the animals, listening.  
O blessed Pieria,<sup>25</sup> Euios<sup>26</sup> honors you  
There he made himself known,  
Dancing the Bakkhic dance,  
From there he leads his whirling  
Mainads across the rushing waters of Axion  
And the Lydian fatherland,  
The giver of good things  
To blessed, happy mortals,  
That place that fattens horses  
With its crystal-clear waters,  
Or so I have heard.

575

- Dionysos: IO!  
Hear me! Hear me call!  
Io Bakkhai! Io Bakkhai!
- Choros: Who is that? Whence does that call  
Come, that call of Euios that summons me?
- Dionysos: Io, io, I call once more,  
The son of Semelê, son of Zeus.
- Choros: Io, io, lord, lord!  
Come now to the sacred thiasos!  
O Bromios, Bromios!
- Dionysos: Lady Earthshaker, shake the earth!
- Choros: Ah! Ah!  
Quickly will the house of Pentheus  
Fall to the ground!
- Dionysos now upon the roof!  
Worship him now!  
O yes, we worship!
- Do you see the marble endcaps  
Separating from the pillars? Bromios  
Raises the war-cry within the house!
- Dionysos: Send a fiery bolt of lightning!  
Burn! Burn down the house of Pentheus!

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<sup>25</sup> Pieria is the region in which Mount Olympos is situated.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. note #3.

Choros: Ah! Ah!  
Do you not see, nor clearly discern  
Semelê's tomb, surrounded by holy flames?  
That same Semelê who left the world, a mortal,  
Struck by the fire of Zeus?  
Throw your bodies down, trembling  
Mainads, for the lord will turn  
This house over on itself. He is the son of Zeus! 600

Dionysos: Foreign women, why have you fallen  
In fear on the ground, trembling? Don't you see?  
It was Bakkhos himself shook down the walls of Pentheus.  
Lift your bodies and control your quivering hearts.

Choros: O greatest light of the sun of our Bakkhic revelries!  
How glad we are to see you, alone as we are here.

Dionysos: Did you become fainthearted when they led me inside  
Pentheus' walls, as if I fell into his dark enclosure?

Choros: How not? Who would be my guard, if you met misfortune?  
But how did you manage to escape that unholy man?

Dionysos: I loosed myself by myself, easily and with no great amount of work.

Choros: Did he not tie together your hands with knots of rope?

Dionysos: In this way I showed his hubris: that it *seemed* he tied me up  
But he neither touched nor bound me; instead he fed his own hopes.  
A bull he found and led into the manger, thinking he had me,  
Of that he bound the knees and hooves and threw *it* to the ground.  
Panting with his zeal, streaming sweat from his body,  
He pressed his teeth to his lips; all the while I stood there  
Full of calm, watching. It was right at that time  
That Bakkhos came and shook the house and lit with fire  
His mother's tomb. When it seemed his house was blazing,  
Pentheus darted back and forth, telling them to take 625  
The river to the house—and this work the servants did:  
Their master's folly. Abandoning that work himself, he saw  
That I had fled and grabbing a dark sword, ran into the house.  
Bromios had, at least it seemed to me—this is only my perception—  
Created an illusion in the courtyard. Pentheus rushed it,  
Darting about, trying to pierce it; thus he thought he'd kill me.  
Beyond this, Bakkhos did other things to size him down:  
He shook the house down to the ground; it's thoroughly destroyed.  
They see now most bitter were my bonds; and now he has given up  
Trying to kill me and dropped with his sword, for he tried to battle a god,  
Being only a man. And just now I stepped out of the house

Calm; I come to you, with no thought of Pentheus at all.

So, it seems to me—indeed, I hear footsteps from the house—  
He'll be here presently. And after all that, what can he say?  
For I will endure him easily, even if he come with a tirade.  
It is safe-minded for the wise man to cultivate good temper.

Pentheus: Terrible things I've suffered: the stranger has escaped me!  
He had *just now* been confined with ropes.  
Oh, oh!

Dionysos: Wait, there he is! What's going on? How is it  
You're now here before my eyes, outside the house?  
Stay there; your anger needs a calm settlement.

Pentheus: How were you able to free yourself and get out here?

Dionysos: Did I not say, or did you not hear, that someone would loose me?

Pentheus: Who? For your words are always new and strange. 650

Dionysos: That one who brings the grape-abundant vine to mortals.

Pentheus: \*\*\*\*\*line missing from the manuscript\*\*\*\*\*

Dionysos: That very thing you reproach is Dionysos' greatest good.

Pentheus: *[To his guards]*  
I order you to lock up the surrounding towers!

Dionysos: What for? Can gods not leap over walls?

Pentheus: Oh, a wise wiseguy you are, except when you need to be wise.

*[Pentheus' messenger arrives]*

Dionysos: When it is most needed, that is when I am wise.  
But now, listen to this man's words,  
The one you sent out to the mountains.  
We will remain here for you and not try to flee.

Messenger: Pentheus, ruler of this Theban land,  
I have come straight from Mount Kithairon  
Where the white glistening snow never loses hold.

Pentheus: And with what serious news have you come so quickly?

Messenger: I have seen the holy women, the Bakkhai, those  
From this land who were stung and darted out in bare feet.

I came to tell you—as I should tell the city—lord,  
How strange and mighty are the wonders they do.  
I need to know, whether I can tell you freely  
What I saw there, or if I must check my tongue.  
For you are known to have a quick temper, lord,  
And swift-rising rage, which is exceedingly kingly.

Pentheus: Speak. You'll go unpunished by me, whatever you say,  
For the just should not be raged against.  
As many terrible things you tell about the Bakkhai,  
That much worse shall we punish this one here,

675

Messenger: It was just as the fatted herd of cattle climbed  
The mountain and approached the grass,  
When the sun sent its first beams to warm the land.  
I saw three thiasoi of dancing women:  
One was led by Autonoë, the second by  
Your mother Agauë, and the third by Ino.  
They were sleeping, all their bodies drained,  
Some leant back on pine branches, and  
Some lay their heads on the leaves of the ground.  
It would seem they slept with safe minds, not as  
You said—intoxicated by cup and lotus-like sounds  
Denuding the forest in their hunt for Aphrodite.

Then your mother gave a call to the gods, standing  
In the midst of the Bakkhai, moved out of sleep  
Because she had heard the bellowing of the horned herd.  
The others threw off the fresh sleep from their eyes  
And sprang up, well-ordered, a wondrous thing to see—  
Young unmarried girls and the old alike in line.  
First they let their hair down to their arms,  
And those who had loosened their fawnskins  
Tied them up again, fastening their dappled skins  
With snakes that licked their cheeks.  
Some held in crooked arm a fawn or wolf cub,  
And gave them their white milk, as many as  
Had recently given birth and were engorged,  
Having left their babes behind. They had placed  
Upon their heads crowns of ivy, oak and wildflowers.  
One took her thursos and struck a rock,  
And from it came fresh water like moist dew.  
Another put her wand in the ground, pushed into earth,  
And the god sent to that one a fountain of wine.  
Any of them that had a craving for milk  
Dug with her fingers at one point in the earth  
And it came forth, and from the ivy-wound  
Thursoi dripped sweet rivers of honey. Clearly

700

You would now drop and offer prayers too  
To this God, had you been present and seen these things.

We gathered together, cowherds and shepherds,  
Sharing our stories in common each to each,  
Of all the strange wonderful things they were doing.  
And one, who was a wanderer with a city-tongue,  
Said to us all: "O dwellers on the holy mountain plains,  
Don't you wish we could chase down Pentheus' mother  
Agauë, take her from the Bakkhic dance, and get some  
Favor from the lord?" We thought he had good points,  
So we crouched in the shrubbery, hiding ourselves.  
When they were ready, we saw them begin to  
Move their thursoi in the Bakkhic dance,  
Calling in unison to Iakkhos, Bromios, son of Zeus  
All danced for Bakkhos, mountain itself and  
Beast as well: nothing remained unmoved by the ritual.

725

Agauë, filled with her leaping, came near me,  
And I, wishing to capture her, jumped out and  
Emptied our hiding-places in the shrubbery.  
So she called out, "O my pack of hunting dogs,  
These men here chase *us*! Follow my lead, and the  
Lead of your thursoi—ready them in your hands!"

Then we fled, fearing that the Bakkhai would tear  
Us apart, but instead they approached the thicket  
Where the grazers fed, unarmed with iron.  
You would have seen one take a young cow and  
Tear it in two while it groaned with swollen udder.  
Others spread out and shredded the older cows.  
You would have seen the ribs and hooves of beasts  
Flying this way and that, and chunks of flesh  
Left hanging under pine trees defiled by the blood.  
Even the proud bulls were thrown down, even these  
Anger-filled horns, taken down to the ground by  
Multiple hands—the hands of young girls!  
Their fleshy coverings were removed more quickly  
Than you could blink your young kingly eyes.  
And then, like birds, they withdrew-- racing off  
Along the extended plain to the river Asopus  
Which feeds the fruitful Theban cornfields.  
They fell upon Husiai and Eruthrai,  
The towns of Kithairon's foothills, as if in war  
And thoroughly turned them upside-down.  
They snatched children from their homes  
And took as much as they could carry, and  
Nothing fell from their arms to the dark ground:

750

Not copper, nor iron. Fire fell upon their hair,  
But did not burn. The people, angered by the  
Bakkhic plundering, took up their weapons,  
And that was a strange thing to behold, lord.  
For the thrown lances were not bloodied  
But the thursoi hit their targets, and the women  
Set the men to flight. Impossible! Unless a god's work.  
Then they withdrew, returning whence they came,  
To the place where their god had sent them,  
And there they washed off the blood, and their snakes  
Licked the drops from their cheeks with their flicking tongues.

Therefore, master, this god, whoever he be,  
Accept him in the city. He is so great,  
In other ways as well they say, and I have heard:  
He gives the pain-ending vine to mortals.  
Without wine, there is no Aphrodite,  
Nor any other delightful thing for man.

- Choros: I fear to speak freely my words 775  
Before this tyrant, but I must speak:  
Dionysos is lesser than no god!
- Pentheus: You see! It's already spreading like wildfire, this  
Bakkhic hubris: a great sin among the Hellenes!  
We must not shrink from our duty.  
*[To his guards]*  
Go, go to the Elektran gates! Gather  
All the shield-bearing troops and swift-footed  
Riders, all the lightly-armed cavalry and as many  
Archers as we have. Tell them we declare war against the Bakkhai!  
For this, especially, cannot be borne— that we suffer what we  
Suffer at the hands of women!
- Dionysos: Have you heard none of what I'm saying to you,  
Pentheus? Even though I've suffered at your hands,  
I will not stop warning you against war with the gods!  
Calm yourself! Bromios will not allow you  
To move his Bakkhai from the mountaintop.
- Pentheus: Will you not stop lecturing me? You're free of those  
Bonds now—would you rather I punished you again?
- Dionysos: If I were you, I would sacrifice to him—better than staying angry  
At his prodding, and being a mortal who spurns a god.
- Pentheus: I will sacrifice, indeed—the slaughter of those females  
Just as they deserve, for the trouble they've caused on Mount Kithairon!

Dionysos: You would all flee in the end, and what a disgrace that would be: Shield-bearing soldiers beaten by thursos-wielding Bakkhai.

Pentheus: We keep getting entangled with this stranger; there's no way out; Whether passively bound or actively free, he just won't stay silent! 800

Dionysos: But sir, it's still possible for this situation to end well.

Pentheus: How's that? By becoming a slave to my slaves?

Dionysos: I will bring the women here, without weapons.

Pentheus: Oh, right. This is just another machination to trick me.

Dionysos: What sort of trick, if I wish to save you with my skills?

Pentheus: But you're on *their* side, in a pact to be Bakkhai forever.

Dionysos: Yes, but I'm not on their side, I'm on the god's.

Pentheus: *[To his guards, again]*  
Bring my weapons here! *[To D.]* And you, stop talking.

Dionysos: Ah! But wouldn't you like to see them gathered on the mountain?

Pentheus: Absolutely! I'd give a great deal of gold for that sight.

Dionysos: What explains this great change of heart?

Pentheus: ...though it would be a wretched thing to see them drunk...

Dionysos: All the same, you would gladly see what would cause you pain?

Pentheus: Oh yes, I'd quietly sit underneath the pine trees...

Dionysos: But they will track you down, if you go secretly.

Pentheus: What you say is right; I'll go openly.

Dionysos: So, shall we lead you? Will you take this journey?

Pentheus: Yes, lead. Let's go—don't waste any time!

Dionysos: But first you need to wear this ritual dress.

Pentheus: Wait, what? Change myself from a man to a woman?

Dionysos: So they shall not kill you, as they would a man in that place.

Pentheus: You're right, of course. You really have been so wise.

Dionysos: Dionysos himself has been our teacher. 825

Pentheus: What then does he advise you to have me do?

Dionysos: I shall take you inside the house and dress you there.

Pentheus: What dress? Not female dress! That would be shameful for me.

Dionysos: So you no longer wish to see the mainads then.

Pentheus: What exactly is this dress you say you'll put on me?

Dionysos: First: upon your head, some longer hair.

Pentheus: And my second piece of costume, what would that be?

Dionysos: A full-length dress and a headband holding the hair.

Pentheus: And is there anything else you'd place on me?

Dionysos: A thursos in your hand, of course, and a spotted fawnskin about your neck.

Pentheus: No, no...I just can't wear women's clothing.

Dionysos: But if you should wage this war against the Bakkhai, much blood will flow.

Pentheus: Right. First I must go and spy on them.

Dionysos: That would be wiser than answering trouble with more trouble.

Pentheus: But how can I walk through Kadmos' city like that?

Dionysos: We'll take back roads; I will lead you.

Pentheus: It's imperative the Bakkhai not laugh at me.  
Let us go inside...it seems I must consider what to do.

Dionysos: Certainly. In any case, what *I* will do is decided.

Pentheus: I will go in now; for I must set out either bearing arms,  
Or that other way that you suggest.



*[Exit]*

Dionysos: Women, the man is aligned with our net: he will go  
To the Bakkhai and his death will give us justice.  
Dionysos: now the work is yours. He is not far;  
We shall make him pay. First he will go out of his mind, 850  
Sent into a light frenzy— for he would never agree to  
Wear women's clothes while in his right mind,  
But while he's out of his mind we can make it happen.  
I need to see him mocked by the Thebans  
As he's led through the city in his womanly form,  
After his behavior from before, trying to be terrible.  
But I must go now, and choose the costume  
Which Pentheus will wear into Hades, sacrificed by  
His own mother's hand. And then he'll know  
That Dionysos, son of Zeus, who was born a god,  
Is the most terrible for humans, as well as most gentle.

*[Exit]*

Choros: Then, into the night-long dance  
I may yet put my bare foot again,  
Shaking with Bakkhic frenzy, and  
Toss my head to the dewy sky,  
Like a fawn dances in green delight  
In the thicket— having just escaped  
The terrifying circle of the hunt  
With their guards keeping watch outside  
And their well-woven nets  
As the hunters cry out and urge  
Their baying dogs toward her;  
With the strength and swiftness of a  
Whirlwind, leaping away to the riverbanks  
She delights in that place where  
Men are not found and the green 875  
Shoots shadow the forest floor.

What is wisdom? Is there no nobler  
Gift given by gods for men than to hold  
One's hand over the head of an enemy  
As if a master over him?

What is noble is always desired.

It may move slowly, but all the same,  
Godly belief has power and will  
Straighten out those mortals  
Who honor their own ignorance  
And wrapped up in that madness

Refuse the Gods their due.  
It is a mystery inexplicable  
How the amount of time it takes  
To hunt down the ungodly is obscured.  
For it is not ever possible  
To comprehend their power  
Or behave the way they do.  
Inexpensive is this knowledge  
And powerful to have  
Because whatever the divine may be,  
Over however long the amount of time,  
This will always be its nature.

What is wisdom? Is there no nobler  
Gift given by gods for men than to hold  
One's hand over the head of an enemy  
As if a master over him?  
What is noble is always desired.

900

Blessed the one who escapes  
A storm at sea and finds safe harbor.  
Blessed also the one who has  
Moved beyond his struggles.  
Different people in different ways  
Surpass each other in wealth and power  
And there are as many hopes as  
Those who hope. Some do achieve  
The "wealth" of mortals, others do not.  
But the one who lives a blessed daily life—  
That one I call happy.

*[Dionysos returns from inside the house, shortly to be joined by Pentheus]*

Dionysos: Come here, you who seek what you should not,  
Overeager, pursuing what should not be pursued,  
Pentheus! I call you! Come out of the house,  
Show yourself to me in your womanly, mainadish,  
Bakkhic garb, for spying on your mother and her group.  
*[Pentheus enters]*  
You resemble perfectly one of Kadmos' daughters.

Pentheus: But— I see not one but two suns, it seems  
And the sevenmouthed Theban walls are double, too.  
You— seem to be a bull, leading me along  
With horns on your head which have just appeared.  
Were you an animal before? You're all bullish now.

Dionysos: The god has joined us. Before, he was in a fury, but now

He's called a truce, and you will see what you need to see.

Pentheus: How do I look? Don't I stand just like Ino,  
Or my mother, Agauë stands? 925

Dionysos: When I look at you, it's like I see one of them.  
But this one lock of hair is awry—  
It's not where I just placed it under the headband.

Pentheus: I was shaking my head this way and that inside,  
Dancing like the Bakkhai, and it slipped out.

Dionysos: Let us do it— we want to take good care of you,  
We will put your hair in order. Don't move your head.

Pentheus: Yes. Put me in order. I am completely in your hands.

Dionysos: Your girdle is loose; you didn't gather your dress  
The right way, and it's hanging down around your ankles.

Pentheus: Indeed I see it there around my feet on the right side;  
But over here the dress looks gathered well.

Dionysos: You will consider me first among your friends  
When you see how truly safeminded the Bakkhai are.

Pentheus: Should I hold my thursos in my right hand,  
Or in this one? I want to be just like the Bakkhai.

Dionysos: In your right hand, and in step with your right foot.  
Your change of mind is remarkable, you know.

Pentheus: Might I have the power to lift Kithairon and  
Carry it, Bakkhai and all, upon my shoulders?

Dionysos: You may, if you wish. Before, your mind was  
Unhealthy. Now you have the mind you should.

Pentheus: Should we bring bars? Or will I pull the summit  
Up with my own hands or arms and throw it over? 950

Dionysos: No, you certainly don't want to destroy the Nymphs'  
Temples or the places where Pan's pipes play.

Pentheus: You're right. It's not manly to vanquish women.  
I'll just hide myself in the pine trees.

Dionysos: You shall hide in a hiding place that befits your hiding

As one who would trick mainads by spying on them.

Pentheus: Yes, and I think I'll see them in the thicket, like  
Little birds in their beds, entwined in love embraces.

Dionysos: For this reason you are being sent as a guard  
You may catch them, if they don't catch you first.

Pentheus: Take me down the middle of Theban land.  
I am the only man who will undertake this act.

Dionysos: Only you— you represent the city alone.  
The struggle to come awaits only you, as it  
Should be. Come, now. I am your safety  
And your guide. Someone else will return you.

Pentheus: My mother, to be sure!

Dionysos: Noted by all-- Pentheus: That's why I go!

Dionysos: Carried back-- Pentheus: What luxury!

Dionysos: In your mother's arms-- Pentheus: But you'll spoil me!

Dionysos: Indeed, spoiled you will be. Pentheus: I will get what I deserve.

Dionysos: You are strange and terrible, and strange things come to you,  
So that you shall find fame, like a tower to the heavens.

*[Pentheus exits]*

Now then, Agauë, stretch out your arms,  
You and the other daughters of Kadmos.  
I send you the boy for a great struggle,  
Which Bromios will win—he and I together.

975

Choros: Go, swift hounds of Lyssa!<sup>27</sup> Go, to the mountain!  
Where Kadmos's girls have their thiasos.  
Now, goad them to madness  
Towards the one in womanish clothing  
Rabidly spying on the mainads.  
First, his mother, down on the smooth rocks  
She'll see him skulking, or up on a sharp one  
And she'll call out to the mainads:  
"Who is that? That one who seeks us,

---

<sup>27</sup> *Λύσσα* (or Lyssa) is to one of the daughters of night, who hunts with a pack of rabid dogs. *λύσσα* alone can also refer to rabies, as well as any raging madness, and is repeated in line 991 above. Virgil, in Aeneid 4.469, considers the *Λύσσαζ κύνεζ* to be the Erinyes, or Furies.

Kadmos's mountainrunners, on the mountain,  
On the mountain, he comes O Bakkhai!  
Who birthed that one? Certainly he's no  
Blood of a human woman, but of some  
Lioness or Gorgon from Africa."

Go, justice now unobscured! Go, unsheathed sword!  
Slice him through the throat—  
That godless, mindless, unjust man  
Sired by earthborn Ekhion.

This man, this self-appointed arbiter of justice  
With his unjust opinions, unruly rules and toil  
Against the rituals of Bakkhos and his mother  
With his insane mind and frenzied will he  
Would conquer the invincible through violence.  
Death, which brooks no excuses, makes thinking  
Safeminded, as it should be before the gods,  
And mortals need for a painless life.  
I bear no ill will towards wisdom. I rejoice  
In the hunting; but there are other great, visible  
Virtues, which, for your life to flow  
With goodness and be godly, you must also respect,  
Both night and day. If your laws exceed the bounds  
Of justice, throw them out, and honor the gods.

1000

Go, justice now unobscured! Go, unsheathed sword!  
Slice him through the throat—  
That godless, mindless, unjust man  
Sired by earthborn Ekhion.

Appear as a bull, or many-headed thing,  
Or as a fire-breathing dragon, or a lion to be seen  
Come, O Bakkhos, you joyful hunter,  
Encircle him with your deadly nets  
As he falls under the pack of mainads.

Messenger: O house, which once all Hellas considered lucky,  
And the old man, seed of Sidon, who produced  
The earthborn sown of a dragon's teeth—  
I sigh for you; I am but a slave, but all the same,  
A slave ought to share in his master's misfortune.

1025

Choros: What's this? What news from the Bakkhai do you tell?

Messenger: Pentheus, son of his father Ekhion, is dead.

Choros: Lord Bromios, you have shown yourself a great god indeed.

Messenger: How can you say this? What do you mean? Women,  
Are you rejoicing at the evil befallen my master?

Choros: We are strangers here, thanking Bakkhos with our foreign  
Dancing; otherwise, I'd be paralyzed by fear of capture.

Messenger: Do you think Thebes so unmanly...?

Choros: O Dionysos, Dionysos, not Thebes  
Holds me in his power.

Messenger: I understand you, ladies, but you still should not  
Rejoice so thoroughly at misfortune; it's not seemly.

Choros: Tell me, show me, what that death-fate was  
He was an unjust man committing unjust acts.

Messenger: After we left the outskirts of Thebes's land  
We crossed the River Asopos and struck out  
For the slopes of Mount Kithairon, Pentheus  
And I—I was following my master—and the  
Stranger who was our guide for that excursion.

First, then, we sat in a grassy glen, keeping  
Silent both our feet and our tongues, so  
We could watch without being watched.  
There was a bend— surrounded by cliffs, wet  
With streams, shadowed with pines— where  
The mainads were, with hands at pleasant work.  
Some were reworking ivy over thursoi that had  
Become unwound; others, like unyoked  
Dappled foals, mirrored each other in Bakkhic  
Song. Pentheus, that sufferer, could not see the  
Full crowd of women and said, "O stranger,  
My eyes cannot reach those bastard mainads  
From where we stand. But, if I climb  
A towering tree on high ground, I should  
See the shameless behavior of the mainads."

1050

And then I saw the stranger perform a wonder:  
He plucked the very top branch of a tree out of the sky  
And brought it down, down to the dark ground.  
It was bent like a bow, or the circle of a drawing  
Compass as it scratches out its curved track;  
So the stranger drew the branch down the mountain,  
By his own hand, to earth—not the act of a mortal man.

Setting Pentheus among the high branches,  
He released it gently, straight up out of his hands  
Making sure he was not shaken off now.  
This straight tree stood straight out in the air,  
Holding my master placed upon its branches,  
And there the mainads beheld him better than he them. 1075  
For just as he became visible, sitting there on high,  
The stranger became invisible, and instead,  
Out of the air a voice emerged, Dionysos-like,  
Crying out: "O ladies, I lead to you that one  
Who mocks me and your ritual honor of me;  
But now you can help with the recompense."  
And at these words, it was as if he made a  
Shining holy light connecting heaven and earth.

The air is silent, and the leaves on the trees are  
Silent, and the beasts make no sound that one can hear.  
But the women aren't sure what their ears have received  
And the girls stand straight up, looking all around.  
And so he calls out again, making sure Kadmos's  
Daughters know it's Bakkhos who calls them,  
And they move with dovelike speed, running no  
More weakly than any racing sprinter, both  
Mother Agauë the natural leader and all the other  
Bakkhai; through the snow-fed dell and mountain  
Craggs they spring, filled with the god's maddening breath.  
They saw my master where he sat in the tree,  
And first they violently pitched large rocks at him,  
Climbing a tower of stone themselves,  
And hurled javelins of tree branches.  
Others threw their thursoi through the air at  
Pentheus, the wretched target, but did not hit. 1100  
For the sufferer was greater than their zeal—at least,  
His height was—to take him down and fell him.  
Finally, they attempt shivering asunder the oaken  
Trunk itself, tearing at the roots without tools of iron.  
When this work ended without accomplishment,  
Agauë spoke: "Bring yourselves, mainads, and stand  
In a circle. Take hold of the branches, and shake this  
Treed beast out, lest he report on our hidden dances for  
The god." So many hands pulled down the fir and  
Tore it out of the ground. He fell then, quickly,  
From high tree, thrown to high ground; he wailed  
All the way down, Pentheus did. For he begins  
To understand what unfortunate end awaits him.

His mother was the first priestess to arrive for the  
Slaughter, and now she falls upon him. He removes

The headband from his head and touches her cheek  
As he realizes it is poor Agauë about to kill him.  
And he says, “Mother, listen:  
It is I, your child, Pentheus, borne by you in  
Ekhion’s house. Pity me, o mother mine,  
Don’t kill your own child for his sins.”

She’s foaming at the mouth now, her girlish face  
Twisted, not thinking as she must think, thoroughly  
Held by Bakkhos, he could not persuade her. 1125  
Grabbing his left arm, bracing herself against the ribs  
Of this unfortunate man, she tears it off—not by means  
Of her own strength, but the god  
Must have given that ease into her hands.  
Ino was finishing the job on the other side,  
Breaking up his body, and Autonoë, with the  
Rest of the Bakkhai. There were cries everywhere.  
He was crying for as long as he could breathe,  
They were crying victory. One carried off his arm,  
Another his foot inside its shoe. His ribs were  
Stripped of all flesh. They all had a share of Pentheus’  
Blood on their hands, tossing his flesh like balls.

His body was laid out all over, in pieces: one under  
Stark rock, another up in the trees of the deep forest,  
Difficult to find again. The pitiful head,  
His mother took it up with her hands and  
Fixed it to the top of her thursos as if it were that  
Of a ferocious lion and carries it through Mount  
Kithairon, leaving her sisters in the choros of mainads.  
She has left the ill-starred hunt, now exulting  
Inside these walls, calling out to Bakkhos, her co-  
Hunter, her colleague in this catch., of their noble  
Victory—a victory which brings only tears as the prize.

And so I take my leave of these happenings;  
Before Agauë reaches the house my feet will be away. 1150  
To be safeminded, though, let me say, is the best way  
To give the gods their due. I really believe this is  
The wisest possession a mortal man can ever obtain.

Choros: We dance our Bakkhic dance  
We sing out the misfortune  
Of that dragon-born Pentheus  
Who dressed in women’s clothes  
Took up his ritual wand, beautiful rod,  
Ensuring him Hades, the bull his guide there.



Kadmeian Bakkhai,  
Your noble, glorious victory turns  
Into funeral song, into tears.  
Such a noble contest, to dip  
Your hand in the blood of a child.

But, for I see into her, rushing to the house  
Agauë, mother of Pentheus, thoroughly twisted  
In sight; acknowledge her, band of the crying god.

Agauë: Asian Bakkhai— Choros: Why do you call me?

Agauë: We carry, down from the mountain,  
A freshly harvested high cutting,  
Blessed our hunting!

Choros: I see and acknowledge you as a fellow-reveler.

Agauë: I caught this one without a snare,  
A savage lion, a young one too—  
Can't you see him?

1175

Choros: From what wild place?

Agauë: From Kithairon... Choros: Kithairon?

Agauë: Slaughtered him.

Choros: Whose was the act?

Agauë: The first blow was my honor. The thiasos calls me "Blessed Agauë."

Choros: And who else? Agauë: Kadmos's...

Choros: Kadmos's what?

Agauë: His other daughters. With me, with me there.  
Touched the beast. Oh, such a lucky hunt!

Choros: \*\*\*\*\*missing line\*\*\*\*\*

Agauë: Join now in the feast! Choros: What? Join, you poor thing?

Agauë: The young shoot has just started to sprout hair  
On his jaw line, and the mane falls softly...

Choros: The hair certainly does suit a savage beast...

Agauë: O Bakkhos the wise hunter  
 So wisely he flushed the beast  
 Out to the mainads.

Choros: For the lord is a hunter.

Agauë: Do you applaud?                      Choros: I applaud.

Agauë: Soon all the Kadmeians...

Choros: And your son Pentheus?

Agauë: He will applaud his mother,  
 Catching this great prey, this lioncub.

Choros: Excellent hunt.                      Agauë: Excellently hunted!

Choros: Do you worship?

Agauë: I rejoice!  
 Great, great and  
 Clear to all, what was accomplished by this hunt.

Choros: Show them now, then, you poor woman.                      1200  
 Show them your victory; show the city your trophy.

Agauë: O, dwellers in this beautifully walled city  
 Of Theban land, come and look upon this  
 Trophy of the hunt the daughters of Kadmos,  
 We won. Without thrown javelins, without  
 Nets, but with the strength of our own white hands.  
 What now is the use of making weapons? What  
 Folly in bragging of your prowess? For we took  
 This one with our own bare hands, and took  
 The beast apart, limb from limb.

Where is my old father? Let him come.  
 And Pentheus, my child, where is he? I want him  
 To take a ladder and fix it against the house, then  
 Go up to display and label this lion's head,  
 Which I, now present, hunted down.

Kadmos: Follow me, bearing that wretched burden of  
 Pentheus; follow, servants, before the house,  
 I bear the body, which was so much work  
 In the seeking, found spread all over the hills  
 Of Kithairon, and none taken in the same place,  
 And laid in the trees, difficult to retrieve.

For, hearing of this deed of my daughters,  
Indeed, as I was coming back inside the city walls  
With old Teiresias from the Bakkhai's side,  
Turning right back to the mountain I carefully  
Collected the dead child from the mainads. 1225  
I saw Autonoë there, who bore Akteon to Aristaios,  
And Ino, both still wretchedly stung,  
But someone told me Agauë danced her way  
Back here, nor was it wrong, what I'd heard.  
For I see her there, in a most unlucky state.

Agauë: Father, no one can boast more than you, of  
All mortals, that they have sown more excellent  
Or blessed daughters. I say all, but me most of all,  
I who left her loom and comb behind and became  
Something greater: killing a wild beast with bare hands!  
I carry it here in my arms so you may see, this  
Token of my *aristeia*<sup>28</sup> so that you can display it  
Outside your house. And you, father, take it in your hands,  
Rejoicing in my hunting, call your friends to the banquet.  
For you are blessed! Blessed! So much we have achieved!

Kadmos: O grief unmeasureable, it's too much to take, murder with  
Your own wretched hands, that's what you've achieved.  
A noble sacrifice to lay before the gods, and then you call  
The priests, and Thebes, and me to this feast?  
I do believe your sorrow will be greatest, more than mine;  
The god was just to punish us, but it's a wonder that  
Lord Bromios, born of this house himself, would destroy us. 1250

Agauë: The old man has become so hard to satisfy, and in  
His eyes a scowl. Would that my son could be  
Such an excellent hunter, follow in your mother's  
Footsteps and strive for the prey along with the other  
Young men of Thebes; but instead he's the sort who  
Makes war on gods. Pentheus needs you to  
Admonish him, father. Who will call him here, so  
I can see him, and he can see my good fortune?

Kadmos: Oh, oh! When you come to comprehend what you  
Have done, you will suffer such terrible pain. But if  
You stay in this state always, and remain so to the end,  
You'll be unlucky and unhappy, forever, it would seem.

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<sup>28</sup> This word means, at the same time, physical prowess and moral virtue. It is the kind of excellence that covers all categories, and so, is left untranslated so as not to limit it to just one. It is important that the physical excellence that allowed Agauë to take off Pentheus' head and the lack of moral excellence that act betrays remain in stark contrast in the same word.

Agauë: How is this not good, what I hold? How is it painful?

Kadmos: First, let your eyes look up into the air.

Agauë: I am looking. Why do you want me to do this?

Kadmos: And is it the same now, or does it seem to have changed?

Agauë: Lighter than before, and clearer.

Kadmos: And the excitement, is that still in your soul?

Agauë: I don't know what that means. But I am becoming aware,  
Anyway, that my mind has shifted in some way from before.

Kadmos: Then, may you hear and think clearly now?

Agauë: I—I've forgotten when we were just saying, father.

Kadmos: Into whose house did you go on your wedding day?

Agauë: You gave me to Ekhion, whom they call a Sown Man.

Kadmos: And who was the son born to him in that house? 1275

Agauë: Pentheus, mine and his fathers, by our marriage.

Kadmos: Whose face do you hold in your arms now?

Agauë: A lion's, or so the other huntresses told me.

Kadmos: Look straight at it now; it's small work to just look.

Agauë: Oh! What do I see? What is this in my hands?

Kadmos: Look on it, and know, clearly.

Agauë: I see great pain, and my own wretchedness.

Kadmos: It doesn't seem to be a lion any longer?

Agauë: No, but Pentheus. Wretched me, I have his head.

Kadmos: We were mourning him before you even knew him.

Agauë: Who killed him? How did he fall into my hands?

Kadmos: Truth is disaster. It always comes at the worst time.

Agauë: Tell, for the wait is making my heart race.

Kadmos: You killed him. You and your sisters.

Agauë: Where was his end? At home? Some other place?

Kadmos: Like Akteon before him, where the dogs dismembered him.

Agauë: Why did this ill-fated one come to Kithairon?

Kadmos: He went to mock the god and your Bakkhic dancing.

Agauë: And how did our path wind its way there?

Kadmos: You were manic; the whole city was dancing to Bakkhos.

Agauë: Dionysos destroyed us. I understand now.

Kadmos: Hubris beyond hubris, that you refused to believe he was a god.

Agauë: The most-beloved body of my child, where is it father?

Kadmos: I searched him all out, and brought the pieces here.

Agauë: And have all his joints been brought back together well?

\*\*\*\*\* (Kadmos' answer is missing from the manuscript)\*\*\*\*\*

Agauë: What was Pentheus' share in my mindlessness?

Kadmos: He did follow in your footsteps: he did not honor  
The god. As a result, he united us all in that one crime:  
You, your sisters, and me—destroying this house  
And me who had no male children borne into it.  
And now I see this heir from your womb, wretched woman,  
Most shamefully and wickedly killed, I look up to the house—  
*[He looks to Pentheus' body]*  
It was you, child, who held us together under this roof,  
Son of my daughter, and you who brought terror here.  
No one could insult this old man while you were present,  
For you took your measure of justice. But now,  
I'll be cast out of my home, dishonored,  
Kadmos the Great, who planted the Theban race,  
And reaped a noble harvest.  
O, man most beloved— Though you no longer exist,  
You count as most beloved to me, child—  
Never again touching my beard with your hand,

Embracing me, or calling me “Grandfather,”  
I say that you are most beloved child. “Who is unjust  
To you? Who dishonors you, old man? Who brings  
Pain to your heart? Tell me, and I will stop it father.”

But now I am miserable, and you are wretched,  
Your mother is piteous, and her sisters wretched,  
If anyone exists who thinks themselves above the gods, 1325  
After seeing the death of this man, let them lead the way back.

Choros: I feel your pain, Kadmos; but the child of your child  
Has the justice he deserves, though painful for you.

Agauë: O father, you can see how much I’ve been turned around...

\*\*\*\*\*lines from the end of Agauë’s speech and the beginning of Dionysos’s are missing  
from the manuscript here\*\*\*\*\*

Dionysos: You will turn into a dragon, and your wife  
Will change into a wild snake’s form, Harmonia,  
That daughter of Ares you took, though mortal.  
Driving an ox-cart, says the oracle of Zeus,  
You will go, with your wife, leading foreigners.  
Many cities you will destroy—countless numbers  
You will pillage—in your campaign. And when  
They destroy the Loxian<sup>29</sup> oracle, they will have  
A miserable return; Ares will draw you and Harmonia  
Out, and then set you alive in the land of the blessed

These things I say as Dionysos, borne to no mortal  
Man, but to Zeus: if you had learned to be safeminded,  
Which you did not want to do, you would have been  
Well blessed, gaining the son of Zeus as your ally.

Kadmos: Dionysos, I beg you, we know we have done wrong.

Dionysos: You know us now, but before you did not sing.

Kadmos: We know these things; but you punish too much.

Dionysos: You committed an act of hubris against me, a god.

Kadmos: Gods should not show their anger as mortals do.

Dionysos: Father Zeus assented to this long ago.

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<sup>29</sup> Loxian, literally “ambiguous,” refers to Apollo, and thus the Oracle at Delphi.



Kadmos: Goodbye, unhappy daughter,  
Though it will be hardly good where you go.

Agauë: Lead me, guides, to my sisters  
So we shall share our piteous plight.  
I would like to go some place where—  
I can't see bloodstained Kitharion  
I can't see Kitharon at all  
I can't see thursoi to remind me;  
Other Bakkhai can have them.

Choros: The gods may take many shapes  
And accomplish unexpected things;  
What seemed to be did not come to be  
God finds a way through the unseeming,  
And that is how events have ended.



CHAPTER 4  
COMMENTARY ON THE *BAKKHAI*:  
*SOPHROSUNE AND PAIDEIA*

*σωφροσύνη* is the key to this play, and so we must fully understand it before we unpack the trunkfull of meaning the *Bakchhai* holds. Helen North's *Sophrosyne: Self Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (1966) attempts to trace the meaning of this word from Homer to Plato. For Homer, she contends, *σωφροσύνη* was not necessary for the ἀρετή (*arête*, "excellence or "virtue") of a hero: Achilles and Ajax, the two most celebrated warriors of the *Iliad*, both lack *σωφροσύνη* (North, 2). Moreover, the intense passion required from them to be Homeric heroes makes *σωφροσύνη* impossible. The word itself does not appear often, underlining its lack of importance, she claims (ibid). Only slightly later, the only surviving Homeric Hymn to contain a cognate of *σωφροῶν* is one to Dionysos: the helmsman who recognizes Dionysos for who he is, and urges his mates to set him free is described as *σαόφρονα*. In that context, it suggests both that he was sensible enough to recognize Dionysos for the god he was, but also that he demonstrated calmness and self-control in the midst of Dionysos's terrifying acts (North, 9). Later, according to North's timeline *σωφροσύνη* will be set as the opposite of ὕβρις (*hubris*) as a constitutional democracy is the opposite of tyranny. (North, 13) Even later, Solon will attach the concept of "moderation" to this virtue, and later still Aeschylus will consider it deeply masculine and religious in nature, one of the four primary qualities for a virtuous man along with being ἀγαθός ("good, noble"), δίκαιος ("just"), and εὐσεβής ("pious") (North, 32). By the time Euripides was writing the *Bakchhai*, North states, "sophrosyne is one of several names for the rational element" (North, 69). For, according to North, "Euripides...saw in the triumph of the irrational over the rational the primary source of tragedy for the individual and society" (ibid).

This analysis is problematic; for one, Euripides’s definitions of “rational” and “irrational” do not clearly map to our modern ones. It seems North suffers from the continuing need to read ancient Greek literature with a post-Roman perspective. Second, *σωφροσύνη* is a virtue that, as we shall see, does not develop in a straight line, and is not universally agreed upon at any point in the timeline.

In his commentary on Plato’s *Charmides*—the dialogue in which Socrates interrogates the concept of *σωφροσύνη*—T.G. Tuckey (1951) also takes a close look at the evolution of this peculiar virtue. He highlights an instance of cognates of *σωφροῶν* in Homer: *Iliad* XXI, in which Apollo reminds Poseidon that fighting with one another on behalf of mortals is inappropriate:

ἐννοσίγαι’ οὐκ ἄν με σαόφρονα μυθήσαιο  
ἔμμεναι, εἰ δὴ σοί γε βροτῶν ἔνεκα πτολεμίζω  
δειλῶν οἳ φύλλοισι ἔοικότες...(*Iliad* XXI, 462)<sup>31</sup>

Tuckey draws a straight line between *σωφροσύνη* and *ἀρετή* (as Plato does, and for that reason), which for Homeric heroes meant strength and skill as well as “valour, which is not considered a moral quality distinct from strength, in the modern sense, but is always closely bound up with physical power” (Tuckey, 11). Moreover, this concept of *ἀρετή* was connected to “*αἰδώς*, which in Homer is the real mark of a nobleman—his sense of duty, his ‘honour’” (ibid).

North would like to see *σωφροσύνη* as a concept that developed in a certain way through time—a marker of the moral development of the Greeks. Tuckey, on the other hand, recognizes that *σωφροσύνη* is a concept that depends not as much on time as it does on

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<sup>31</sup> As quoted in Tuckey, 6.

subjectivity. For Plato who, when he was writing the *Charmides*, struggled to make sense of the death of his teacher—the most *σωφροῦν* man he had ever met, *σωφροσύνη* was first and foremost the virtue of Socrates. The problem was to determine what exactly that was, for he had yet been unable to replicate it. Some of the men who had been students of Socrates later became members of the Thirty Tyrants, and Plato had therefore become disillusioned with public life. How was it possible for men who had known and learned from Socrates to have perverted his teachings so? The answer: Socrates's *ἐλεγχος*—his method of examining—was designed to strip away prejudice and tradition so that a morally autonomous soul will see, and therefore understand the truth. Men such as Critias and Charmides—two of Socrates's acquaintances, two of the Thirty, and the two interlocutors of this dialogue—behaved as they did because after their prejudice and reliance on tradition were stripped, nothing was put back in their place. The wrong limits were cleared, but no new limits were applied, and so hubris and cruelty resulted.

This, then, is the meaning of *σωφροσύνη* that lasts: an understanding of the limits, both personal and political, that leads to virtuous behavior—to *ἀρετή*. The precise definition of those limits, however, changes with the context. *σωφροσύνη* is always subjective.

Tuckey gives a list of the many different senses and translations that have been attached to *σωφροσύνη*: prudence, caution, soundness of mind, wisdom, self-control, self-respect, appropriateness, discretion, moderation, obedience, “not going beyond due limits” (Tuckey, 6-8), but finally he attaches it to the Delphic prescription, which was also Socrates's: “Know thyself” (*γῶθι σαυτόν*), and this is the subjectivity which is the key to true *σωφροσύνη*. North was off the track. *σωφροσύνη* is not a virtue whose definition

changes over time. *σωφροσύνη* is a virtue whose definition changes based on the individual and society to which it is being applied.

How then, will this key unlock the mysteries of the *Bakkhai*, a play that has baffled commentators for centuries? As I demonstrated above, in both introduction and translation, *σωφροσύνη* is a recurring word and theme in this play, and Euripides places it in the mouths of only those who are themselves *σωφρῶν* and Dionysos says it more often than anyone—five times. Kadmos, Agauë and Pentheus never utter the word themselves. Moreover, each instance of *σωφρῶν* is didactic—meant to instruct an interlocutor in the appropriate limits.

The first instances of *σωφρῶν* are in Teiresias’s speech to Pentheus, instructing him in the story of Dionysos at lines 314-18:

οὐχ ὁ Διόνυσος σωφρονεῖν ἀναγκάσει  
γυναῖκας ἐς τὴν Κύπριν, ἀλλ’ ἐν τῇ φύσει  
[τὸ σωφρονεῖν ἔνεστιν εἰς τὰ πάντ’ ἀεί]  
τοῦτο σκοπεῖν χρὴ· καὶ γὰρ ἐν βακχεύμασιν  
οὔσ’ ἢ γε σῶφρων οὐ διαφθαπήσεται.

The various translations of this passage are discussed above, in the introduction. My final translation of this passage is as follows:

Dionysos cannot compel women to be safeminded  
About Aphrodite if it’s their nature already  
To be safeminded in all things. You must  
Understand this. For she who is safeminded  
Will not be ruined, even in the midst of Bakkhic revelry.

The message, again, is clearly didactic. “You must understand this” (*τοῦτο σκοπεῖν χρὴ*): *χρὴ* is the interpersonal that means “it is necessary,” as well as “it must” or “it ought to be”—again, it’s a matter of appropriateness. *σκοπεῖν* is a verb that holds both seeing and

understanding in its meaning—a very Platonic verb. See this, Pentheus, and understand: if a woman (or any individual) has already determined their limits to a *σώφρων* degree, there is nothing that will destroy that virtue. The Choros echoes and reinforces Teiresias’s teaching with the fourth instance of *σώφρων*: *τιμῶν τε Βρόμιον σωφρονεῖς μέγαν θεόν*. (“You are safeminded to honor the great god Bromios.”)

Dionysos himself, in his guise as the Stranger, attempts to educate Pentheus in the stichomythia beginning at 463. First, when there might still be hope for Pentheus, if he would only strip away his prejudices:

Pentheus: Have you first come here, bringing your god?

Dionysos: All the foreigners already dance his mysteries.

Pentheus: Well, they’re defective thinkers compared to Greeks.

Dionysos: In fact they think much better. Their customs are just different.

Pentheus’s crime, his *hubris*, is not just in his willingness to and actual war against the god; it is his inability to see that his limits are inappropriate and must be reevaluated. In this stichomythia, Dionysos takes on the role of Socrates, assessing Pentheus; and the diagnosis: “I, safe-minded, tell you, unsafe-minded: do not bind me.” Pentheus suffers from an extreme lack of *σωφροσύνη* and his fate is an object-lesson. Euripides understood that *σωφροσύνη* was the most important of all the virtues; he knew Socrates personally. Moreover, his plays were considered Socratic even by his contemporaries. Aristophanes, in the *Frogs*, has Euripides “admit without apology that he has introduced his audience to thinking, even taught them how to think [*phronein*] by presenting characters who question, reason, and debate whatever happens and whatever they do” (Meagher, 24) The *Bakchae* is not the least of examples for this—it is the pinnacle of

Euripides's Socratic method. By making *σωφροσύνη* the ruling force of this play, he could demonstrate not only how a lack of appropriate limits results in one's own destruction, but also that the sphere of Dionysos—the god of pushing limits of intoxication, fluidity, identity—was an appropriate means by which to discover what the limits are. For while he was a man of his time who—like Socrates—could question the truth of the behavior of the gods in myth, that did not mean he did not believe in their power.

Each of the two messengers utter the word *σώφρων*, and both of them use it to describe the behavior of the Kadmeian Bakkhai on the mountain. Moreover, they are not wrong. Much ink has been spent on characterizing the Bakkhai on Kithairon as frenzied. But a close inspection will show that their behavior is truly *σώφρων*. They only begin to attack the men at 731 because they have been threatened. While they do draw human blood, the text is clear that the only bodies they dismember belong to animals. Even this, in its context, can be considered *σώφρων*—self defense, and then sacrifice. The second messenger describes the women in the language of *σωφροσύνη* even as he's telling the story of how Pentheus is killed:

There was a bend— surrounded by cliffs, wet  
With streams, shadowed with pines— where  
The mainads were, with hands at pleasant work.  
Some were reworking ivy over thursoi that had  
Become unwound; others, like unyoked  
Dappled foals, mirrored each other in Bakkhic  
Song. (1051-1057)

The work is calm, pleasant, and quiet until, again, Pentheus disturbs it with his threatening presence. We know his presence is threatening because he's been making threats since the play began: "Securing them in iron nets, I'll stop this Bakkhic mischief

right away!” (231-232); “I’ll stop the pounding of his thursos and/The shaking of his hair: I’ll cut off his head!” (241-242); “Whoever this stranger is, does it not seem right,/To hang this blaspheming blasphemer till he dies?” (247-248); “And if you take him, bring him here chained/So that he may die by stoning,” (355-356); “We will either sell them off/Or I’ll take them myself as slaves.” (512-513); “I will sacrifice, indeed—the slaughter of those females Just as they deserve, for the trouble they’ve caused on Mount Kithairon!” (796-797); this last and most extreme is made just before he falls under Dionysos’s power, and literally becomes more calm—forced *σωφροσύνη*. It’s the lesson he must learn. Not only is Pentheus clearly hubristic—his sustained and frequent threats against the representatives of Dionysos are clear on this fact—he must learn the lesson, and if he will not, the people must learn through his example.

Kadmos and Agauë are also guilty of being resistant to this lesson. When we first meet Kadmos he is dressed as if he were one of the Bakkhai but his attitude is suspect: “For we must (as he’s the son of my own daughter, Dionysos, whom Zeus has made appear to men)/Give him as much power as we can.” (181-183) For Kadmos, Dionysos’s power is equivalent to family power; at least, until Dionysos uses his power to destroy the family. Kadmos’s argument to Pentheus is not that of Teiresias or the Choros; it’s that Pentheus should get on board the family power train:

Even if he’s not a god, as you claim, call him a god.  
 What do you care? Tell this lie for a good cause,  
 So that Semelê will appear to have birthed a god here,  
 And you will have brought honor to your family. (333-336)

Kadmos’s actions are empty. He is not truly *σώφρων*—never even strips away his prejudices. His primary value is conserving his family’s power, and it remains so—only

shifted to include Dionysos. He does not learn his lesson either. At the conclusion of the play he claims to have: “Dionysos, I beg you, we know we have done wrong.”

(1344) But then he presumes to preach to the god: “Dionysos: You committed an act of hubris against me, a god. Kadmos: Gods should not show their anger as mortals do.”

(1347-1348) Kadmos has not learned the lesson. He continues to dictate to Dionysos, and has not reassessed his limits in any way. He does not know himself. His limits are inappropriate because they resulted in Pentheus—the scion of a family that puts itself above all else. Moreover, Kadmos’s end can be seen as the just punishment not just for this *hubris*, but for the slaying of the dragon of Ares. He will still rest in the Elysian fields as a benefit of his marriage to Harmonia. It definitely could have been worse.

Agauë is an interesting case. She doesn’t enter the stage until Pentheus is already dead, but we have some sense of her beforehand from the Messengers’ speeches. “Then your mother gave a call to the gods, standing/In the midst of the Bakkhai, moved out of sleep/Because she had heard the bellowing of the horned herd.” (689-691) She is clearly the leader, and enjoying her time on the mountain away from the *polis*. Much has been made about this fearful depiction of wild women. According to my reading, however, Euripides uses the preexisting Greek anxiety about the *σωφροσύνη* of women outside of their traditional spaces and roles, and turns it on its head. Pentheus, the least morally reliable character in the play, represents the traditional point of view: “Corrupted by the thiasos they set/Wine-jugs in their midst, sometimes/Slinking out into the wilds to serve the lusts of men,/Asserting they are Mainads, offering burnt flesh,/But obviously they place Aphrodite before Bakkhos.” (221-225) Euripides has a pattern of interrogating at the status of women and the effect it has on their inner lives, though there is much



disagreement as to his motives.<sup>32</sup> The *Bakkhai* is no exception. The language describing the peace and serenity of the Bakkhai on the mountain, before they are threatened, is exquisite: see lines 677-713, and 1048-1087, a one specific section of which follows:

*Δύρσον δὲ τις λαβοῦσ' ἔπαισεν ἐς πέτραν,  
 ὄθεν δροσώδης ὕδατος ἐκπηδᾷ νοτίς·  
 ἄλλη δὲ νάρθηκ' ἐς πέδον καθήκε γῆς,  
 καὶ τῆδε κρήνην ἐξανῆκ' οἴνου θεός·  
 ὅσαις δὲ λευκοῦ πώματος πόθος παρῆν,  
 ἄκροισι δακτύλοισι διαμῶσαι χθόνα  
 γάλακτος ἐσμούς εἶχον· ἐκ δὲ κισσίνων  
 Δύρσων γλυκεῖαι μέλιτος ἔσταζον ῥοαί.  
 ὥστ' εἰ παρήσθα, τὸν θεὸν τὸν νῦν ψέγεις  
 εὐχαῖσιν ἂν μετήλθες εἰσιδὼν τάδε.*

One took her thursos and struck a rock,  
 And from it came fresh water like moist dew.  
 Another put her wand in the ground, pushed into earth,  
 And the god sent to that one a fountain of wine.  
 Any of them that had a craving for milk  
 Dug with her fingers at one point in the earth  
 And it came forth, and from the ivy-wound  
 Thursoi dripped sweet rivers of honey. Clearly  
 You would now drop and offer prayers too  
 To this God, had you been present and seen these things. (704-713)

In addition to setting a serene scene just prior to the attack of the Bakkhai on the foothill villages, this piece underlines again the fluid nature of Dionysos. Water, wine, milk, and honey: all these are his; as Teiresias says, “The fundamental wet good[s]” (279), but also the fluid identities of these women. They go from *σώφρων* to frenzied quickly, but also at the express order of Dionysos, and only with his application of godly power. He calls out to them, and makes a “Shining holy light connecting heaven and earth.” (1083) They have to be called a second time to be sure that it’s Dionysos that is calling to them, and only then do they begin to move to attack Pentheus. They have become

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<sup>32</sup> See Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women* (1993) and Goff, *Citizen Bacchae: Women’s Ritual Practice in Ancient Greece* (2004) for more discussion of Euripides’s relative feminism. This subject is too large to attempt a full treatment in this thesis.

Dionysos's tools, and their actions following are by his will. The death of Pentheus, tragic by definition, is a complex event containing both the point of Dionysos's education of Thebes ("The city must learn this well, even unwilling," (49) and the most extreme consequence of women leaving the *polis* and their traditional roles. These are not the only Bakkhai in the play, however. The Choros of Asian Bakkhai—well-educated in the ritual and philosophy of Dionysos—demonstrate that being Bakkhai and being *σώφρων* are not mutually exclusive. This is key. Pentheus, Kadmos and Agauë are all examples of what not to do in this lesson that Dionysos is teaching in the classroom that Thebes has become. The Choros are the good students; they already know the score. When Agauë returns to Thebes with the head of Pentheus in her hands, the Choros is as disgusted with her as anyone, though the disgust is tempered with pity: "Show them now, then, you poor woman./Show them your victory; show the city your trophy." (1200-1201) They show sympathy to Kadmos as well: "I feel your pain, Kadmos; but the child of your child/Has the justice he deserves, though painful for you." (1327-1328) The Choros have been the models of *σωφροσύνη* from the beginning of the play, when they praise Teiresias's *σωφροσύνη* as well. This is so even when the Messenger scolds them for their joy at Pentheus's fate, for it is not at all inappropriate to rejoice at your enemy's pain in Euripides's Athens. The Messenger is speaking as one who is on the other side in that conflict, and therefore does not approve.

At the death of the one man in Kadmeian Thebes who had gone so far out of his mind that he was willing to slaughter his own mother and aunts to avenge the cattle they had destroyed, Dionysos's punishment of the city ends. His speech to Kadmos and Agauë that concludes the play, at least what remains of it, is phrased not as much as

punishment as it is as prophecy. Dionysos doesn't use any language of his own agency in the speech, and caps it with "Father Zeus assented to this long ago." (1349) He never says that it is he to whom Zeus assented. Zeus assented to the events, not to Dionysos. The fact that Kadmos and Agauë plead with and blame Dionysos for their fates does not mean he is directly responsible. He does, however, repeat again: "if you had learned to be safeminded,/Which you did not want to do, you would have been/Well blessed, gaining the son of Zeus as your ally." (1341-1343) If any of them had actually learned the lesson that Dionysos had arrived to teach them—that to be truly *σώφρων* one must know thyself and reassess limits (best done through worship of Dionysos himself)—their fates may have been different. But this is myth, and this is theater, and it had to happen the way it did in order for Euripides to teach the same lesson to his audience, and to the generations that followed: be *σώφρων*.

Unfortunately, as a result of the colonization of ancient Greek texts and the effect on them of the moralizing of the West, this lesson has been largely lost. Only by interrogating this colonization and reassessing the Greek texts in a Greek context can we hope to learn what Euripides meant to his contemporaries and look forward to what he can teach us as well.

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