The *Bacchae*

Euripides’ *Bacchae* demands interpretation on many levels. Most critics have read the play primarily as a religious statement. The poet either offers a defense of Dionysus in a drama of justified divine retribution or attacks Dionysiac religion and, by implication, other similar contemporary Athenian mystery cults. Others emphasize the play’s demonstration of an inescapable human irrationality that finds an outlet both in religious cult and in the mob violence of Athenian democratic politics.¹ The text undeniably

The interpretation of the *Bacchae* offered in this chapter was first presented to the Princeton Department of Classics in 1973. The chapter is drawn from my 1975 Harvard dissertation, “Ritual Irony in the *Bacchae* and Other Later Euripidean Plays.” An abbreviated version of some of the material here was published as Foley 1980, Segal 1982, which deals with some of the ideas discussed here, especially that of metatheater, was published nearly ten years after the consolidation of my own views on the play and after the completion of this chapter. Hence I have not attempted to annotate the areas in which Segal’s stimulating and generally complementary views overlap with or expand on my own.

¹For excellent surveys of the central critical problems presented by the *Bacchae*, and especially its treatment of theological issues, see the introduction to Dodds 1960, Winnington-Ingram 1948: 6–13, Diller 1955, and Rohdich 1968: 162–68. Dodds and Winnington-Ingram view the play as an eclectic demonstration of Dionysiac religion that ultimately takes no firm moral position, but emphasizes the overpowering reality and amorality of the divinity and the forces that the god represents in human existence. On the relation of the play to contemporary thought, morality, and politics, see esp. Nilhard 1912, Deichgräber 1935, Arthur 1972, Diller, and Rohdich. My interpretation of the play is meant to enrich and not to exclude the standard interpretations of Dionysus in the *Bacchae* as a nature god or a god of religious ecstasy. The prototheatrical form of Dionysus’ appearance in the play is yet another aspect of a complex and multifaceted divinity.
Ritual Irony raises questions about the nature of divinity and reflects the precariousness of social and political life in late fifth-century Athens. Yet for the contemporary Athenian, Dionysus was associated not only with ritualized release of self-control and with madness, with women and the natural world outside the polis, with Apollo at Delphi, and with the civilizing if ambivalent gifts of wine and festival, but also with theater itself; for the tragedies, comedies, and satyr plays of Athens were presented in his honor. Our earliest evidence suggests that Greeks always worshiped Dionysus in a theatrical form: through masks, costumes, miracle plays, music, and dance. Euripides wrote the Bacchae at a time when his contemporaries were becoming increasingly self-conscious about the nature of their theater god.\(^2\) In Aristophanes’ Frogs, Dionysus, as spectator, actor, and judge in his own festival, seeks to save the city by rejuvenating its dramatic art.\(^3\) Contemporary visual artists were just beginning to popularize the theatrical Dionysus, seated among actors who display the masks and costumes of plays performed in honor of a young and often effeminate god.\(^4\) The Bacchae, too, since its subject is the introduction of a cult into a city-state, specifically the rituals of the god of tragic festival, becomes as well a play about the ritual aspects of tragedy itself.

In the Bacchae, in a manner similar to the Heracles and the Electra, Pentheus’ tragic disaster is represented as a perverted sacrifice and agon that form part of a corrupted Dionysiac festival. As in all the other plays examined in this book, the ritual crisis reflects a fundamental disruption in the relation between man and god and among men in the community. Pentheus and his city have rejected the worship of Dionysus, and the god promises in the prologue to

\(^2\)The controversy over the relation between the origins of Greek tragedy and the worship of Dionysus is irrelevant to my argument, since we know that Euripides’ contemporaries thought of Dionysus as a theater god.

\(^3\)See Aristophanes’ Clouds 518–19 for another reference to Dionysus as patron of comic poetry. It is not clear whether Cratinus’ Dionysalexandros and Archilochoi or Eupolis’ Taxisarchoi exploited Dionysus’ role as god of theater, although he certainly played the role of arbiter in the underworld in the first two of these plays.

\(^4\)The earliest known artistic treatments of Dionysus in a theatrical context are the Pronomos vase (ARV2 1336), the Peiraeus relief (fig. 51 in Pickard-Cambridge 1968), and possibly the fragments of a vase from Taranto now in Wurzburg (ARV2 1338). These works date from the end of the fifth to the early fourth century.
enact the full revenge necessary to assert his divinity. The unity of Thebes is destroyed: the maddened women have departed for the wilds to experience a communion with their god and nature itself; within the city Pentheus is opposed by his elders, Cadmus and Tiresias, as well as by a growing number of the population, represented by the therapist and first messenger. In this atmosphere of “sacrificial crisis” the boundaries between god and man and beast, between sacred and profane violence, have collapsed. Pentheus, insisting on his differences from others, becomes entangled in “mimetic rivalry” with the divine stranger; he inevitably becomes the object of the proliferating violence and loss of differentiation. As in the Heracles, Euripides uses the ritual crisis to explore simultaneously god, man, society, and his own tragic art.

What Dionysus brings to Thebes and to Hellenic culture in the Bacchae is festival, and in particular a form of embryonic theater. Pentheus is sacrificed because he cannot understand and incorporate truth in the symbolic form that festival and theater offer to the adherent, the spectator, and the polis. In the Bacchae Euripides closed a career of increasingly manipulative and illusion-breaking treatment of dramatic conventions by presenting yet another fin-de-siècle “theatrical” Dionysus. The poet used the god to investigate the complex relation between ritual and theater, festival and society. By taking festival back to its origins, he examined the role of festival and theater in establishing, enforcing, or threatening the social order, and the way that art interprets human and divine experience for the city.

In the IA and the Phoenissae the poetry of the choral odes and the discontinuities of the action remain in counterpoint, and ritual creates a fragile link between the two realms. In the Heracles Lyssa’s inversion of the traditional praise poetry of the choral odes and Heracles’ tragic sacrifice of his children ultimately create from an anachronistic epic hero a humanized hero for the Athenian democratic polis. Past myths retain a transformed authority as Heracles’ crime becomes a sacrifice to the Muses. In the Bacchae myth and action, odes and iambic scenes, are intertwined from the start, as is appropriate in a plot that represents a penetration of the secular

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world by a divine power. The action of the play gradually becomes, until the final scenes, fully ritualized and mythical, and Dionysiac poetry transforms reality as the chorus becomes one with and even predicts the action. Here poetry becomes performance. As the barbarian chorus serves equally to represent a populist Greek ethics familiar in most tragic choruses and to introduce a radical foreign cult, it both reflects on the political and social aspects of ritual, on the capacity of ritual and drama for danger, violence, and salvation for society, and opens new questions about its own role in drama. Only in the final scenes, when Dionysus has left the level of human action, does the audience experience fully the distance between secular reality and the order and vision created through myth and ritual so characteristic of Euripides’ late drama. The mysterious pronouncements of the god from above the stage offer mythical truths incomprehensible to Cadmus and Agave lamenting below, and neither Tiresias nor the chorus nor the stranger speaks to decode them. In the Bacchae, then, tragedy emerges from a sacrificial disaster, but it is ultimately defined by the gap that develops between the Dionysiac vision and the strictly human and sane imagination.

Ritual and the Death of Pentheus

The action surrounding Pentheus’ sacrificial death, beginning with Dionysus’ transformation of Pentheus into a maenad and ending with the return of Agave with the head of her son, suggests affinities with a ritual sequence in Greek festival, that of pompē, agon, kōmos. Hence the sacrifice of the king must be considered in relation to this larger festal context. After Pentheus has shown himself obdurate against all other demonstrations of Dionysus’ divinity, the god charms him with the possibility of actually seeing or being a spectator (theatēs, 829) to the behavior of the maenads on

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the mountain. He maddens the king, dresses him in the robes, fawnskin, thursos, and long hair of a female follower of the god, and instructs him in the movements of maenadic dance. Each detail of apparel is dwelt upon in sequence. Dionysus adjusts Pentheus' costume, touching his head, hands, and feet, thereby "consecrating" his victim, setting him apart from the profane world. Pentheus' words at 934 acknowledge the context:

Go ahead, arrange it. For we are in fact ritually dedicated [anakeimestha] to you.

Once he is costumed, Pentheus experiences a change of sight. He sees double, two Thebes and two suns, and the stranger appears to be a bull. The god offers to escort Pentheus by an obscure route to the contests, agônes, in which he himself secretly plans to be the victor (964–65, 974–76):

Thus the appropriate contests await you. Follow and I will go as your protective escort [pompos . . . sôtêrios].

. . . I am leading the young man into this great contest [agôn] in which I and Bromios will come out the victors. The event itself will show the rest.

Later the messenger describes Dionysus as pompos: "and the stranger who was escort in our embassy" (theôrias, 1047). The god has led Pentheus from the city to experience a theôria (embassy, the experience of being spectator, or spectacle) where he encounters the god's chorus (chorous kruphaious, 1109) of maenads on the mountain. Pentheus, in order to see the maenads better (1058, 1060, 1062), mounts a tree with supernatural aid. Since trees were sacred to Dionysus, the god severs the earthborn Pentheus from his origins and places him symbolically in his power.

The maenads now see him, although he can barely see the maenads (1075). A new light appears; silence falls. The maenads' eyes turn in their heads, and at the god's command they pelt Pentheus with stones, branches, and thursoi, tear up the tree on which he is perchéd, and throw him to the ground. Thinking he is a beast, they rip him apart. His mother, Agave, acts as priestess of
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the ritual (hieraa phonou, priestess of murder or death, 1114), which Cadmus later explicitly calls a sacrifice (1246–47): “A fine sacrifice [to thuma] you have struck down for the gods and to the feast invite Thebes here and myself.” (See also mainadas thuoskoous, 224, and thuousin, 473, of participants in a Dionysiac rite.) Pentheus, once eager to make a “sacrifice” of the women (796) or to sever the stranger’s head (241), becomes a decapitated sacrificial victim himself. (See the similar reversal of Pentheus’ plans to sacrifice— sphazōn, 631—the stranger, which results instead in his own demise—kataphageis, 858.) Tearing off his mitra (headband), he returns to sanity at the last moment, recognizes his errors (hamartiaisi, 1121), but fails to communicate his identity to his mother. His mother, imagining herself a hunter, returns home with the head of Pentheus to celebrate a feast or revel (kōmos) with the city, the chorus, and her family in honor of her own and the god’s victory on the mountain. She congratulates Dionysus for being kallinikos (victorious, 1147; see also the chorus on the Cadmean bacchants in 1161). The chorus commends Agave for her part in the agōn (1163–64: “a brilliant contest, to cast on your child a hand dripping with blood”) and invites her to share in a triumphal celebration (kōmon, 1167, sungkōmon, fellow reveler, 1172). Agave pronounces herself makaira and eudaimōn (happy and blessed, 1180 and 1258) for her victories over the “beast.” Yet the play closes with Agave wishing to dissociate herself from the memory of the thursos (1386) and departing on a new pompē (ō pompoi, 1381, if the lines are not interpolated) into lonely exile.

Pentheus’ death shares with normal sacrificial procedure the dedication of a chosen victim to the god through special adornment, ordinarily with a wreath or gilded horns, but here with a change of clothing; the pelting of the beast, here with branches, generally with grain; the moment of ritual silence; the luring of the victim to make a religious error and to “consent” to its demise; the scream of the women; and the implication of all participants in the sacrificial death.7 Similar but by no means identical preliminary

7For procedure in sacrificial ritual, see Chapter 1. See esp. Seidensticker 1979 on the parallels between the sacrificial death of Pentheus and the procedures of the normal ritual; Seidensticker fails to come to terms with the aberrant and horrifyingly perverted nature of this human sacrifice of the king. On the relation of

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procedures were used in various Greek rituals involving the expulsion of a pharmakos or scapegoat. In other respects, however, though called a sacrifice after the event, the ritual is an aberration, a perversion of the controlled civic norm. In a wild rather than civic context the unwilling victim is torn apart by the hands of mad-dened women rather than despatched with due ceremony and a sacrificial knife by men. A stranger presides over the event. Boundaries between sacred and profane, pure and impure, collapse. Spattered with blood and pollution (Christus Patiens 1694), Agave returns to nail her son's head on the palace (animal skulls were sometimes dedicated in this fashion) and to invite Thebes to an unholy feast. The benefits of the ritual clearly fail to accrue to the sacrificers, and Pentheus does not serve as a pharmakos to save his city. The king's body is pitifully reconstructed, then apparently left unburied onstage by his family without a hint of future regeneration and rebirth for the city. Thebes is notably absent in the final scene, and the future promises exile for the shattered royal house and new and hostile Dionysiac incursions into Greece from Asia. Agave is repelled by the god's rites, and even the vengeful chorus seems shaken by the fate of Cadmus and his daughter. (See the pity expressed for Cadmus in 1327, and perhaps by implication in the use of talaina for Agave, 1200, and tlamon at 1184).

When they appear in conjunction the three terms pompē, agōn, kōmos mean respectively a procession before a religious festival, the contest(s) celebrated at such a festival, and the festive revelry that follows such contests. Each word, taken alone, also has additional connotations applicable to the dramatic context here. Pompōs is used of Hermes escorting souls into the underworld as well as generally of the protective escort of a god; both meanings have an ironic applicability here (see pompōs . . . sōtērios at 965). The verb pompēuō

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Dionysiac sacrifice to the civic norm, see esp. Detienne 1979a: chaps. 5 and 6, Guépin 1968, and Darkaki 1980.

8For Pentheus as pharmakos, see esp. Dodds 1960 on line 963. For a discussion of Greek rituals involving a pharmakos and their relation to the Oedipus Rex, see Vernant in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1981: 87–119.

9Vickers 1973: 318: "Agave thought that she was the sacrificer, but she discovers she was only the sacrificer; and whereas the interests of those two persons are usually identical, in the dénouement of this play they are violently opposed. To Dionysus accrue the benefits."

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is specifically associated with the ribald jests and abuse that occurred during the processions at Dionysiac festivals (Demosthenes 18.124). If the associations of *pomeuo* can apply to *pompos* and *pompē*, the god here predictably uses the *pompē* to mock his rival (842, 854). In a society in which contest in any form played such a central role, it is difficult to specify the meaning of *agōn*, which can refer to a debate, a trial, an athletic or theatrical contest, a labor of Heracles, and a struggle. Pentheus’ *agōn* concludes a struggle with the god that concerns power and justice (vengeance), words, perception, and transformation through costume and movement. The word *kōmos* is used of revelry, often accompanied by feasting and dancing, of the procession celebrating a victor in the games, of a band of revelers generally (such bands were said by some to explain the etymology of *kōmōidia*), and of a revel in honor of gods or heroes (*Helen* 1469 of Hyacinthus, and Demosthenes 21.10, *tois en astei Dionusioi kai ho pompē . . . kai ho kōmos*). The *kōmos* of this play is both a victory song for the god and a revel/potential feast for Agave and the chorus. The term *kallinikos* is used originally of athletic or military victors, and later of the victorious dramatic poet or comic hero. The words used for spectacle here, *theatēs*, *theama*, and *thēoria*, resonate both with the theme of festival in the play (in Aristophanes’ *Peace* *Theoria* is festival personified, redolent of games, sex, food, and sacrifice) and with the wordplay on sight and insight present throughout the *Bacchae*. Pentheus, representing his city, goes to the mountain intending to be a spectator. Instead, his sight changes, and he becomes a spectacle and participant, while the god alone remains a spectator.

The pattern *pompē*, *agōn*, *kōmos* used here brings to mind a *typical* festival pattern. But the dramatic context allows us to be more specific. Winnington-Ingram notes that the pattern *pompē*, *agōn* *kōmos* (*kallinikos*) must be meant to refer to the Olympic games. The pattern does fit what ancient sources tell of the games, both in the sequence and in the naming of the proceedings: the *pompike hodos* at Olympia, the athletic *agōnes*, and the triumphant, near godlike welcome given the victorious athlete, including a feast at

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11 Winnington-Ingram 1948: 24 n. 3 and 128 n. 2.
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the Prytaneion. Such a reference would provide an apt conclusion for the contest of power between man and god throughout the action, sometimes pictured in athletic terms (491, 800), sometimes portrayed as a struggle between hunter and hunted. The ironies of this hopeless physical contest are patent. The role of contestant is split between Pentheus, who will compete with women (and the god), and his mother, who competes against her son. The audience for these contests consists of women; yet women were not allowed to participate in the games and were probably even excluded as spectators at Olympia. Dionysus persuades Pentheus, as the champion of the state, to exit to death from his city not openly in armor, but secretly by back streets, while looking forward on his return to a luxurious embrace from his mother (965–70):

D. Follow, and I shall go as your protective escort.

From there another will bring you back . . .

P. Yes, my mother.

D. . . . a sight remarkable to all.

P. For this purpose I come.

D. You will come back carried . . .

P. What luxury you speak.

D. . . . in your mother’s arms.

P. . . . and you will drive me to self-indulgence.

D. Yes, indulgence—of a sort.

P. I am achieving what I deserve.

This passage very possibly makes an ironic allusion to epinician themes expressed, for example, in Pindar Pythian 8.83–87, which also refers to the return of athletes, this time losing athletes, from athletic contests:

Yet at the Pythian festival their homecoming was not ordained to be happy. Nor, as they returned to their mothers, did sweet laughter stir delight about them. But apart from their enemies, stung by mischance, they slink along through back streets.

Pentheus’ secret departure anticipates his “athletic” failure; he skulks out of the city like Pindar’s defeated athletes, while the ironies of his triumphal return into, or in, his mother’s arms are
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grimly obvious. Pentheus dies as the failed champion of a male population of Thebes, which barely makes a dramatic appearance. Like Hector’s last running race with Achilles, this is a contest not for a prize, but for the life of a man (*Iliad* 22.159–61). The ἀγών, designed to control competitive violence within a society and to promote its glory, collapses into intrasocietal violence and disaster for its participants. To equate themachy with a contest of strength so thoroughly perverted not only travesties a norm but also implicitly recalls the repeated epinician warning to the athlete to attribute victory to the gods and not to overstep human limits in the pride of success.

Thomson reads the pattern *pompe, agon, kômos* in several ways, but first in terms of Greek and especially the Spartan adolescent initiation ritual.12 His interpretation is highly speculative, given our tenuous knowledge of Greek initiation rituals, and especially of Attic initiation. Yet aspects of Pentheus’ downfall do suggest a kind of perverted initiation into the god’s mysteries and/or a regression from hoplite to ephebe initiate and even to a helpless infancy, as Pentheus imagines the luxury of returning home in his mother’s arms. The choice to abandon hoplite’s arms and to adopt the tactics of deception, the movement to the wild, the involvement with hunting, and the cross-sexual dressing belong in Greek myth and practice to the period of prehoplite initiation.13 The dressing of youths in female costume in certain Attic festivals (*Oschophoria, Anthesteria*), Achilles’ female disguise as a youth, and the deceptive tactics used by Orestes to carry out the commands of the oracle in the *Libation Bearers* are examples from literature and practice that grow out of such initiatory traditions. Dionysus and the women retain the order, authority, and steadfastness characteristic of the hoplite, and the god, not Pentheus, achieves a full masculine identity in the play. The god proves himself the Olympian son of Zeus, reborn as son of the father from the male thigh,


while Pentheus regresses to the world of women, his head grotesquely embraced in his mother's arms (1277). Both the obvious psychological implications of Pentheus' regression and his destruction by a competitive and enveloping mother have been well discussed by a number of critics.14

As in the Heracles and the Electra, Euripides uses the imagery of sacrifice, agōn, and festival in the Bacchae to make multiple ritual allusions. But here the festival, or protofestival, introduced by Dionysus can also be read as a primitive version of his own theatrical festival in Athens. The specifically poetic inspiration behind the costuming of Pentheus that inaugurates the festal pattern is emphasized by the use of the verb ekmousōō in 825: Dionusos hēmas exemousōsen tāde, "Dionysus has inspired these actions in us." Dionysus' effect on the landscape is also presented throughout the play as comparable to that of a poet such as Orpheus or Amphion, whose poetry is so powerful that it can move nature (114, 561–64, 726–27). And, if the tradition that Thespis produced a Pentheus as one of the earliest Greek dramas was current in Euripides' time, the choice of subject for Dionysus' introduction of a primitive drama into Thebes would be particularly appropriate.15 Thomson also notes the similarities between the pattern pompé, agōn, kōmos and the official language used to describe the first day of the City Dionysia. The pompé followed an eisagōgē, in which the statue of Dionysus was brought from Eleutherae by ephebes with accompany­ing festivities and sacrifice to rest in the theater precinct, and culminated in the sacrifice of a bull to Dionysus in his sacred precinct. The phalloi carried in the pompé commemorated the myth in which the Athenians at first resisted Dionysus' entrance into the city but were smitten by a disease from which they freed themselves by manufacturing phalloi in honor of the god (Schol. Aristophanes Acharnians 243). Both the festal pattern of the Dionysia and the play commemorate the prehistoric introduction of the worship

14For psychoanalytic interpretations of Pentheus, see esp. Sale: 1972, Green 1979: 172–75, La Rue 1968, and Segal 1978a. Vian 1963: 178 stresses that in Hesiod and the Melampodia Cadmus does not lack a male heir. Hence Euripides must have altered the myth or chosen a variation that makes Pentheus' psychology more believable.

15For Thespis' Pentheus, see the Suda on Thespis.
of Dionysus into a city, disastrously at Thebes but finally successfully at Athens; both eisagōgē and pompē included an important role for the ephebic initiates and sacrifice.

The theatrical festival as a whole, with its day of processions followed by the dramatic agōnes, and concluding with celebrations in honor of the victorious poets, could equally well be understood as reflecting the pattern pompē, agōn, kōmos. The festival included a sacrifice performed at the altar of the god in the center of the orchestra, a ritual that was often repeated and perhaps visually recalled in the metaphorical sacrifices of the tragic victim(s) in the plays that followed. Finally, this same festal pattern is inherent, as Cornford has argued, in the language and structure of Old Comedy, which centers on the formally structured agon or debate and concludes with a celebration of victory (sometimes including or preceded by sacrifice) by the comic hero or heroes and often also by the poet himself. The dramatic poets themselves describe tragic and comic debates or contests as agōnes, and their victors as kallinikoi. (See Aristophanes Acharnians 392, Frogs 785 and 867, for agōn used for debates occurring in the plays, and Acharn. 504 of the theatrical contests at the Lenaia; see also Euripides Heracleidae 116, Suppliantes 427, Phoenissae 588 and 930, and Antiope frag. 189 N. For kallinikos applied to victors in comic debates or contests, see Aristophanes Acharn. 1227–28, 1231, 1233; Birds 1764; and Knights 1254.)

The order of events at the City Dionysia poses some difficulty for this reading, for the law of Euegoros, quoted by Demosthenes, refers not only to a pompē but also to a kōmos that may well have occurred on the first day before the dramatic agōnes but after a series of performances in honor of various gods at their shrines and a sacrifice to Dionysus. Yet what Dionysus seems to be introducing to Thebes in the Bacchae is in any case a protofestival. Hence the audience could recognize in this emerging “theatrical” festival a conflation of the initial day of the City Dionysia, with its intro-

16On this point, see Burkert 1966a and the discussion of Burkert’s theories in Chapter 1.
17Cornford 1934.
18On the problem of the order of events at the City Dionysia, see Pickard-Cambridge 1968: 63–66 and Deubner 1932: 138–42.
duction of the god and his worship; the festival as a whole, with its
dramatic agônes followed by the celebration of victory by the
poets; and comedy, with its comparable structural pattern. This
would, of course, be the case only if the audience experienced
Dionysus’ introduction of his worship as a “play” or as an emerg­
ing form of drama that could be interpreted as either “comedy” or
“tragedy.”

In the protodrama of the Bacchae Dionysus uses “festival” or
“comedy” to make the city of Thebes “see” his divinity and to
establish his worship. Up to the death of Pentheus, when the god
withdraws from the level of human action, Euripides has Dionysus
assert increasingly greater control over the play and make it an
expression of his divinity. In his triumphant play within a play he
costumes Pentheus and brings him to a prearranged setting on the
mountain as both spectator and participant in an agôn. Both the
maenads on the mountain, the doubles of their sisters in the chorus
(see 1109), and Pentheus begin as spectators dressed by the god,
and then, at the god’s command, become unwitting participants in
a drama in which Pentheus is both mocked and “sacrificed.” At
the heart of the agôn become sacrifice Pentheus undergoes a literal
peripeteia (tragic fall, 1111–13) from high to low and a vain and
momentary anagnôrisis (tragic recognition, 1113–19) of his situa­
tion and his own disastrous errors of perception (hamartiai, 1121,
Aristotle’s own term for tragic error).19 The episode closes with a
kômos or celebration of the god’s victorious action shared by an
“audience” (Agave and the chorus) whose minds are under the
control of or dedicated to the god. From this perspective Di­
ony sus’ revenge takes the form of a crude and terrifying “theater,”
a horrible conflation of “tragedy” and “comedy,” in which the
king’s death is, for the god and his followers, a divine joke and a
cause for the kind of triumphant celebration that traditionally
closed Old Comedy, but for Pentheus the fulfillment of a tragic
penthos in which he does not survive to come to terms with his
hamartiai, in which he fails to communicate his tragic recognition
to his mother, and in which Pentheus the would-be spectator and a
“chorus” of Theban women have become actors in a spectacle that

19 See Dodds 1960 on 1117–21.
they cannot evaluate or control. In his own “drama” the god who fuses and blurs all the antithetical distinctions by which Greek culture defined itself (man and god, man and woman) also blurs the distinction between tragic and comic genres. Euripides, in contrast, offers the audience in the final scene an answer to Dionysus’ play and a firmly tragic perspective on the same events.

Dionysus’ Theater

In the Bacchae Dionysus reveals himself to Thebes primarily through the means common to theater and the larger Dionysiac tradition: voice, costume, music, dance, and song. It is precisely for this reason that the Bacchae is one of the few Greek plays whose text permits reliable inferences about the stage production. We know what musical instruments the chorus carried and the major features of the costumes of all the principal characters except the messengers. We know that the mask of Dionysus was smiling (439, 1021). We can reconstruct much of the stage business concerning costumes and musical instruments. The language of the play refers with remarkable frequency to the visual and musical experience onstage and emphasizes that both honoring and comprehending the god are essentially theatrical acts, an exploration of the nature of illusion, transformation, and symbol. If the Thebans are to receive the god without disaster, they must, like Cadmus and Tiresias, accept a transformation of the ordinary self through costume and respond to the music, dance, and emotional release that Dionysus offers. Compare, for example, the effect on Pentheus of Tiresias’ speech about the god with Tiresias’ and Cadmus’ gesture of dressing and dancing as his followers. The physical transformation communicates to the king as the rationalizing speech does not. As both the god and his chorus emphasize, ritual, sound, gesture, and symbol express the god as effectively as or even more effectively than language. The god’s defenders use riddling and ambiguous words, and it is only after the stranger leaves the stage at 976, having completed his plans for revenge, that there is a renewed emphasis on effective verbal communication. Pentheus, the ruler of Thebes, is destroyed through his inability to
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understand truth in the symbolic form that Dionysiac festival and theater offer to the adherent or spectator. Hence unlike Dionysus, Tiresias, or Cadmus, he finally cannot play a role but surrenders to it. The *opsis* or theatrical spectacle (Aristotle *Poetics* 1450b28) of the *Bacchae* is not simply a *hēdusma* or additional “seasoning.” The plot or arrangement of events, the action or *praxis*, and the spectacle become for large parts of this play one and the same thing.

Dionysus begins the play by sending his followers into Thebes to beat their drums about the palace of Pentheus “so that the city of Cadmus may *see*” (58–61):

> Raise up the drums native to the *polis* of the Phrygians and invented by mother Rhea and myself, and, surrounding the royal palace of Pentheus, beat them, so that the city of Cadmus may see [hōs horai Kadmou polis].

He will make himself manifest (*emphanēs*, 22) to Thebes through dance (21). He will fasten on fawnskins and hand the *thursos* to the citizens (24–25). He has forced the female population of Thebes to adopt his costume (*skeuēn*, 34). In short, Dionysus, himself in human disguise, will reveal his divinity to Thebes primarily through spectacle, costume, and sound as he controls and stage-directs the play.

The language and action of the play allow Dionysus, until the return of the second messenger, to make the play and the manifestation of his divinity an indivisible process. His role as stage director/actor corresponds with his role in the plot—to demonstrate and then to avenge his divinity; his role as *chorodidaskalos* (see 58–61) is inseparable from his roles as leader and god of his worshipers; his role as producer of stage illusions matches his ability to inspire a change of mental state in his followers; and, as we shall see, his presentation of his smiling mask, his “comic” performance in a tragic *agon*, communicates to the audience his religious ambiguity. Dionysus makes his chorus his players and the destruction of Pentheus a “play,” replete with set, costume, and spectators. Until the final messenger speech there is no action in the play (the chorus’, Cadmus’, Tiresias’, the *therapōn’s*, the first messenger’s) that is not controlled by or voluntarily supportive of the god
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except, for a brief period, Pentheus’. The play itself becomes the net in which the increasingly isolated Pentheus is trapped. Euripides’ characters, especially his gods, sometimes seem to control the staging of a play. In the Medea, for example, Medea perhaps expresses her transformation to something more than human through her power to stage her final encounter with Jason from the chariot of the sun.20 The bodies of the children are not displayed at the human level on the ekkukléma as expected; nor does Medea pay physically for her crimes. Mother and children are magically waffted offstage. But in the Bacchae Dionysus’ control over the stage action becomes a pervasive expression both of the god’s own nature and of his control over theater as its patron. Yet Dionysus’ play within a play does not, like many modern plays within plays or like the comic parodies of ancient tragedy, function primarily to distance the audience from the drama and call attention to and question its own reality as art; instead, it implicates the audience in the drama and calls attention to its own art as reality. That is, theatrical illusion demonstrates the reality of the god, and illusion and symbol are the only modes of access to a god who can take whatever form he wishes (hopoios étel’, 478).

Dionysus begins the play by directing the entrance (55–56) of a chorus consisting of his followers from Asia, not the citizens of Thebes. They make his music and use his instruments, sing imitations of his ritual songs to cult meters, dance his dances, tell his myths, and, in the palace scene, respond to a divinity that Pentheus can neither see nor control. They are in effect his players: each ode reflects or anticipates the shifting demonstration of divinity promised in the prologue.21 In the parodos they display the god’s costume, music, and dance and invite Thebes to join in their worship (see especially 105–6). In the first stasimon (370–432), taking their cue from Tiresias’ speech in defense of the god, the women present in lyric form a similarly anachronistic view of the god as a fifth-century patron of symposia, poetry (410), and festivals. They endorse the opinion of the ordinary man (pléthos, 430), which is

20On Medea’s probable transformation to goddess at the conclusion of the Medea, see Knox 1977.
21Here I disagree with many critics in my sense of the relation of the chorus to the action. See esp. Parry 1978: 146.
immediately voiced onstage by the *therapōn*.

The second stasimon (519–75) marks the transition in Dionysus’ position from powerlessness to power, moving from despair at Dionysus’ imprisonment to a recognition of his divinity when it is manifested in the destruction of the palace and in the sound of the god’s voice offstage (576–603). Whatever we conclude occurs in the palace scene, whether nothing at all or a major or minor change in the stage building, no stage business at this point could adequately imitate the apocalyptic destruction of the palace, including lightning and earthquake, which the chorus sees while Pentheus does not. The miracle must become for the audience more symbolic and prophetic than realistic. The audience sees not a miracle, but a chorus enacting the experience of a miracle, or presenting a theatrical illusion. The third stasimon (862–911) takes up the god’s words in the previous scene—he will avenge the god who is *deinōtatos* (most terrible / wonderful) and *ēpiōtatos* (kindest) to men—by moving from release to vengeance, using the same metrical patterns in the strophe and antistrophe to express joy and anger; it is immediately followed by the scene in which Pentheus sees double, and sees for the first time the bestial as well as the gentle aspect of the stranger. In the fourth stasimon (977–1023) the chorus prophetically imagines Pentheus’ destruction on the mountain, soon to be reported by the messenger; the messenger speech is immediately followed by a choral celebration of the god’s victory over Pentheus (1153–64).

In the *Bacchae*, then, the chorus reenacts or enacts beforehand through partially ritualized song, dance, and music what Dionysus and his converts enact largely with language and gesture. By these ritualized and mythical means, the chorus demonstrates how the

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22See Dodds 1960: 117 and 131 on the relation among the first stasimon, the Tiresias scene, and the appearance of the *therapōn*. The movement noted by Dodds in the third and fourth stasimon from particular to universal, which is contrary to Euripides’ usual practice, may arise from the exceptional responsiveness of the women of the chorus to shifts in the fate of their cause in each preceding scene.

23For discussion and bibliography on the palace scene, see esp. Dale 1969: 124–25, Grube 1933: 44–47, Roux 1961: 30–42, and Castellani 1976. I am inclined to agree with Dodds 1960: xxxvii that Euripides has put “a psychological miracle at the center of the action.” Theatrical (or psychological) illusion is the only avenue by which the god can be worshiped and understood.
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god can be “seen,” worshiped, and interpreted. The Asian women, however, do not occupy the same position, emotionally, intellectually, or perceptually, between the royal family and the audience as the chorus in other tragedies. Though voicing uncannily familiar Greek ethical sentiments, they are ultimately a voice alien to the community and use the language of ἑσυχία (apolitical quiet) and ἱήσουσα (self-control and moderation) to serve their passionate desire for revenge. The presence of this unruly chorus of barbarian women not subject to civic authority, together with the absence of any male citizens who are not converted to the god, has the effect of isolating Pentheus from his city and putting the action on the plane of myth and ritual. History reasserts itself only with the prophecies of Dionysus in the final scene. Unlike the foreign chorus of the Phoenissae, for example, the women of this chorus express no sympathy for the king or the polis, and their attitude, because of their exclusive allegiance to the god, comes to seem pitiless and inhumane. Instead of performing the function of relatively reliable ethical and political mediation typical of the Greek chorus, they move gradually toward the more extreme perspective of the maddened spectators to Pentheus’ tragedy on the mountain. This creation of multiple audiences to the god’s theatrical demonstration of his divinity makes the spectators conscious that they are viewing and interpreting the god’s actions through a series of subjective and unreliable perspectives and performances. Access to the god is indirect and symbolic; how spectators interpret what they see is a product of their own degree of involvement in and assent to the events before them.

Dionysus confronts Pentheus through speech, music, costume, dance, and stage illusion. Euripides represents Pentheus’ inability to understand and control Dionysus not only through the king’s failure to interpret his words but also through his failure to discern the god within the theatrical forms that express him. Just as Dionysus is god of wine and the wine itself (278–79, 284), so Dionysus is god of theater and the theatrical forms that manifest him. Every scene in the Bacchae up to the final messenger speech makes an issue of Dionysiac costume and movement as a visible representation of the elusive god. Large sections of the two long messenger speeches, as well as the parodos, communicate his divinity through descrip-
the costumes, songs, and movement of the maenads. In the early scenes Pentheus’ response to Dionysiac dress, a mixture of incomprehension, fear, and attraction, precipitates his downfall; he rejects the god by rejecting the visible and aural signs of his worship. He reacts to his grandfather’s offer of an ivy crown as if he were threatened with mental contamination (344). After a detailed examination of Dionysus’ dress and appearance in their first meeting, Pentheus wishes to strip off parts of the stranger’s costume onstage (493–96). His response to dance and music is equally violent. He tries to send the stranger to dance in the darkness of imprisonment in the stables (511). He also tries to stop the god’s followers from making music, to suppress the insistent beating of their drums (513–14).

It is with theatrical weapons, also, that Dionysus destroys Pentheus. He entraps the king in a series of spectacles directed by himself. Twice, both in the stable scene, which the god reports as a “messenger” (616–37), and in the final disaster on the mountain, Dionysus calmly sets the scene—in the second case replete with costume, actors, and set—and then stands back or disappears into a position of heavenly observation, an unmoved spectator of human struggle. The god’s control extends to predicting the content of the first messenger speech before the messenger speaks (657) and to directing Agave, offstage on the mountain, to stretch out her hands in readiness to receive her prey (973). The servant of the king not only reports the events on the mountain but also advocates acknowledgment of the god’s divinity (769–70); Agave and her sisters respond unanimously to the god’s voice. The stable scene, in which Dionysus teases Pentheus with a bull that the king imagines is the stranger, and then with his own false image, is a sort of offstage rehearsal for Pentheus’ mad scene, in which Pentheus inverts the illusion, seeing the stranger as a bull. The report of these events in the god’s own unusual messenger speech teases the audience with its pretense of uncertainty. (See especially 629, *kaith’ ho Bromios, hōs emoi̔ge phainetai, doxan legō*, and 638.) What the audience knows to be true, since it knows that the stranger is a god, is presented as speculation to the chorus onstage. The choice of the more “primitive,” satyric, and less characteristically tragic (*Poetics* 1449a19–28) trochaic tetrameters rather than the iambic
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trimeters normal in most messenger speeches seems appropriate to the irony here: the mocking god appropriates the role of human messenger to his own inhuman and deceptive ends. The chorus’ visual experience of the palace miracle comes to seem a less ambiguous acknowledgment of the divine presence than Dionysus’ speech.

Dionysus goes on to lure Pentheus, in a manner unique in extant tragedy, to change his costume and become his player/worshiper. By playing on his internal conflicts, through costume he separates Pentheus from his role as king and hoplite (see especially 809–46). In the scene in which Pentheus begins to succumb to the god’s power, Dionysus clinches his victory through a detailed description of the costume he is to wear: long hair, a female peplos, a fawnskin, and a thursos (830–35). Pentheus wavers between donning the dress of the god’s worshiper and putting on his armor and proceeding against the women with force (845–46). He believes he will gain through his disguise the enticing perspective of a mere spectator (956–59, 1058–62, also 829). Instead, once he has dressed as a woman, he rehearses his part and adjusts his costume like an actor before a play (925–44); he relishes his resemblance to his mother or her sisters and imagines that his dress will endow him with the powers of a maenad (945–46), little realizing that his change of costume has committed him to becoming instead part of an “unhappy spectacle” (1232, of Agave with the head of Pentheus) beyond his control. In the stable scene Pentheus has contended with beast and stranger as separate images. Now he sees Dionysus as a beast, and in sensing that the stranger represents more than the man he has been playing onstage, he “sees” the god and his inhumanness for the first time. Costume, costume change,

24See POxy 2, no. 221, for a fragment, possibly from a messenger speech in trochaic tetrameters from Phrynichus’ Phoenissae, and compare the striking lyric messenger speech by the Phrygian slave in Euripides’ Orestes.

25See my later discussion of a possible toilet scene in Aeschylus’ Edonoi. Pentheus’ adoption of another costume / role has many implications. Ritual and theater share a devotion to dressing and cross-sexual role-playing. The psychological aspect has been much discussed. By becoming a maenad Pentheus moves into a space characteristic of the god, where the differences between male and female, human and divine, man and beast, spectator and participant, are lost. For further discussion of these issues, see esp. Gallini 1963 and Segal 1978a.
and acting thus become a central dramatic image for understanding and worshiping the god.

Only occasionally in Greek tragedy does the meaning of a scene depend primarily on role-playing and on the costume changes that a character makes onstage. The reverse is true for Old Comedy. Comic and tragic (or satyric) costume change serve similar functions only when the change of costume is intended to manipulate and deceive or to effect an escape, rejuvenation, or restoration to heroic status; and it can be argued that all such changes are essentially more characteristic of comedy than of tragedy. In the Helen, for example, Menelaus is transformed from a shipwrecked and almost comic nobody into a Homeric hero; simultaneously, Helen changes to mourning garb, a deception that leads to a symbolic remarriage between the two long-estranged spouses. In contrast, when Heracles’ children put on mourning garments in the Heracles, when Cassandra throws off her signs of priestly authority in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, or when Eteocles (probably) arms himself to meet his brother in the Seven against Thebes, the change of costume entraps the characters in a tragic pattern of action beyond their control. Such costume change is relatively rare in Greek tragedy and is generally reserved for climactic moments. In the Bacchae, however, costume change serves as a sign of conversion to Dionysiac worship, and what are largely comic techniques with costume and props are used for the first time in a play that has a disastrous outcome.

Indeed, Dionysus’ theater deliberately unsettles the audience with its striking merging of comic and tragic stage business with costume and props. Cadmus and Tiresias gracelessly but strategically accept the worship of the god by donning his fawnskin and thursos and adopting a hobbling dance. The “comedy” of this scene (see 250, 322) centers on their fussy concern to play their new roles correctly. As often in comedy, the theatrical point lies in the lack of correspondence between the internal and the external, between the state of mind on the one hand, and body and costume and movement on the other. The dramatic juxtaposition between the identical movements of the graceful and authentic chorus and the decrepit playacting old men as worshipers of the god is compara-
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ble, from the point of view of theatrical effect, to a scene such as that in the *Thesmophoriazusae* between Agathon, Euripides, and Euripides’ kinsman. The kinsman is too crude and masculine to adopt comfortably the female dress that the effeminate Agathon wears very naturally as an inspiration to his dramatic poetry; this inability to play the role is prophetic of his failure to maintain his disguise in the women’s assembly and exposes Euripides’ “weakness” as a dramatist. It also serves to remind the audience of the male actor’s traditional role in impersonating women. Aristophanes’ own disguised heroes, like Dionysus in the *Bacchae*, have no trouble duping their victims. In contrast, Cadmus in the final scene ultimately finds himself facing the tragic rather than the comic implications of his opportunistic (333–36) role-playing and conversion. If he returned to the stage still wearing the god’s emblems, the changed and now pitiful effect of the costume must have strikingly underlined this point.

The same ludicrous fussing over Dionysiac costume is repeated in the terrible scene in which Pentheus tries awkwardly to rearrange his costume with the help of Dionysus. The king parodies the god. The visual effect is comparable to the confrontation between Heracles and Dionysus at the beginning of the *Frogs*. The ludicrous god, dressed in an effeminate saffron robe, tragic buskins, and a lionskin, comes face to face with the original he is trying to impersonate and whose powers he is trying to acquire, Heracles. God absurdly imitates man (or former man) to acquire extraordinary strength. Also laughable is the inability of a divinity to carry off the kind of role change that Aristophanes’ comic heroes usually accomplish without difficulty. The Dionysus of the *Frogs* thinks that the costume gives him courage; instead it exposes his pretenses to true divinity and his all too human cowardice. In contrast, the smiling god of the *Bacchae* expresses his divine authority by his control over role change and his ability to make those onstage believe whatever he intends. Dionysus can change with sinister ease from divine to human and back, in all probability without even a change of costume.26 Pentheus’ change of costume reveals his human limits; in imitating the god he does not acquire,

26See the section on the mask of Dionysus.
as he expects, extraordinary powers over his environment, but the cerements of death (see 857–59 and 1156–57)\(^{27}\) and the exposure of a divided self. Again, change of role / costume simultaneously effects comic exposure of self-ignorance and tragic entrapment.

In Aristophanes’ *Wasps* Bdelycleon tries to remake his father into a leisured elderly aristocrat by persuading him to reject his juryman’s rags for refined and pretentious garments. But the intransigent Philocleon finally retains a kind of fierce, if childish and absurd, integrity more generally characteristic of the tragic hero. The effeminate and luxurious robes fail at the process of reform even more fully than Bdelycleon’s rhetorical victory in the *agôn*, which has merely confined his father’s obsession to the privacy of the household. Pentheus’ consent to a change of role brings him a “comic” exposure inappropriate for a tragic hero, whereas Philocleon’s heroic invulnerability to comic correction through costume gives a surprising twist to the comic denouement of the *Wasps*. Comedy, as Bergson and others have pointed out, reduces the spiritual to the physical and divides mind and body so that the latter ludicrously mirrors the hidden rigidities or unconscious desires of the former.\(^{28}\) When Philocleon’s sexuality and aggression burst incorrigibly through the trappings of culture, or the relative’s masculinity cannot be masked by feminine dress in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, the exposure is appropriately comic. But the use of costume and gesture—that is, of the body—to make a comparable exposure on the tragic stage moves the action uneasily close, in style if not fully in tone, to the comic. The terrifying and mythic verbal exposure of Hippolytus’ denied sexuality in his destruction by a bull and his own mares is replaced in the *Bacchae* with the revelation of Pentheus’ ambivalent sexuality through the physical cloaking of the masculine body by crudely adopted feminine dress and movement, and with the attempt by Cadmus and Tiresias to mask old age with the supple movements of youth. Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae* at 136 borrows a line from Aeschylus’ *Edonoi* in

\(^{27}\)But see Dodds 1960 on *piston* Haidan at 1157.
\(^{28}\)See Bergson 1956: 61–190, esp. 93–94. *Tractatus Coislinianus* 8, which may reflect the contents of Aristotle’s lost book of the *Poetics* on comedy, takes a similar view of comedy’s treatment of soul and body: *ho skoptôn elengchein thelei hamartêmata tês psuchês kai tou sômatos*.
which Lycurgus mocks Dionysus for his feminine dress and appearance: *podapos ho gunnis; tis patra; tis he stolē*; “From where comes this ‘woman’? What is his fatherland? What is this female dress?” (Aesch. frag. 61 N). Since the allusion to Aeschylus is followed by the dressing of Euripides’ relative as a woman, we can speculate either that Euripides adopted the dressing of Pentheus as a woman from Aeschylus’ Dionysiac drama (in art Pentheus is portrayed in armor or in masculine garments as he spies on the maenads or is attacked by them), or that Euripides was inspired by Aristophanes to invent the toilet scene of the *Bacchae*, going beyond Aeschylus’ emphasis on the sexual ambiguity of the god’s identity to borrow Old Comedy’s ludicrous transformations of the body to express an equivalent ambiguity in the human soul. Euripides’ gesture is in any case outrageous, since Aristophanes’ parody seems clearly directed at addressing the limits that tragedy must respect in relation to costume.

In the case of the comic hero, the voluntary transformation of self through costume is a form of temporary control over circumstances not subject in reality to the force of the individual’s desires or actions. Cadmus and Tiresias try to make such a “comic” accommodation to phenomena beyond rational control; by being willing to “act” they can accept the god while retaining their identities. They are simultaneously actors/worshippers and spectators. The mad Pentheus retains no such comic distance from his role. To worship Dionysus, or to be a comic hero, is to accept or adopt a temporary change of role, and to receive in exchange participation in a boundary-transcending experience. Euripides, by adopting techniques from Old Comedy, can evoke in the audience expectations about comic role-playing: the ways in which costume change can be used to expose the hidden desires, ignorance, or pretension of the hero’s enemies or to express the power, however temporary, of the hero’s imagination over reality. In comedy this exposure of desire or ignorance or manipulation of reality is laughable because the characters are grotesque and the consequences minimal and temporary—certainly not deadly. In the *Bacchae* the same theatrical techniques expose with accelerating horror the tragic inadequacy of man to understand and control himself or his
The *Bacchae*

environment. Dionysiac madness becomes the dark double of comic befuddlement.

Myths about Dionysus’ introduction of his worship to new cities can end happily or disastrously. Those who accept the god are blessed with *eudaimonia*; those who reject him are punished with madness and a deadly metamorphosis. In the Homeric *Hymn to Dionysus*, for example, the sailors who fail to recognize the god suffer metamorphosis, whereas the steersman, who does, receives *eudaimonia*. Euripides retains or at least appears to retain this possibility of a “comic” or “tragic” outcome in the early scenes of the *Bacchae*. (Much of what I say below seems also to fit satyr play as well as comedy. Satyr play often included the imprisonment and escape of a chorus of satyrs dedicated to Dionysus and the worsting of an *amathēs* enemy to the god. See Euripides’ *Cyclops* 173 and *Bacchae* 480 and 490.) Dionysus will punish Pentheus only if he insists on resisting the god (50–63); he and his adherents argue that accepting the god means wine, festival, and release from care (see Thucydides 2.38 on festival as a release from care and a suppressant of grief). In the final scene the god repeats this argument when he tells Cadmus that if he and Agave had known how to exercise wisdom (*sōphronēin*, 1341), they would have been happy and blessed (*eudaimonein*, 1343). The similarities between the language of the early choral odes of the *Bacchae* and that of the comic chorus of Eleusinian initiates in the *Frogs* are for this reason not surprising. (See *Frogs* 326–29 and *Bacchae* 80 and 106–7; *Frogs* 345–50 and the Cadmus–Tiresias scene; *Frogs* 332–34, 376, 394, and 410 and *Bacchae* 160–61; *Frogs* 346 and *Bacchae* 380–81.)

29Burnett 1970: 26–27 gives examples of Attic Dionysiac myths in which the god comes to be accepted with considerably less difficulty and with happy results. She stresses that Dionysus offers to Thebes a civilized public cult that reverts to primitivism only when the women are attacked. Up to line 810, the god gives Pentheus a fair chance—unique in tragedies of divine revenge—to recognize the god’s divinity and receive his blessings. For a more extensive treatment of Dionysiac myths, see Massenzi 1969. As his analysis shows, even the acceptance of the god usually leads to the sacrifice of the figure who introduces his viticulture (as in the case of Icarius or Staphylus).

30On satyric elements in the *Bacchae*, see Sansone 1978 and Seaford 1981. Seaford remarks (274) that the blinding of the Cyclops hints at the sacrificial moment when the burning torch is dipped into the sacrificial water.
Ritual Irony

As in comedy, the god offers to Thebes the possibility of temporary regeneration through a festive reversal of normal social and political categories. An apparently powerless outsider, he confronts an opponent who is in some sense his powerful double, and destroys the enemy of festive pleasure with mockery. By being granted temporary control over reality the comic or “trickster” hero, like the god in this play, uses his ability to transform his and others’ identity and his ability to manipulate language, costume, and theatrical illusion to bring the world into harmony with his aspirations. Dionysus also possesses the *ponēria* (amoral outrageousness) and deceptiveness of the trickster hero. The *Bacchae* chorus welcomes the return of the mad Agave, now a successful hunter rather than a mere woman (*dechē the kōmon euiou theou, 1167*). In comedy the same gesture might well have resulted in a shared celebration between the city and the rejuvenated protagonist. But here the smiling god alone successfully completes a “comic” action as he celebrates through the returning Agave and the alien chorus a triumphant *kōmos*. Again as in comedy, even those who join in the hero’s fantasies can be deceived and fail to share in his festive victory. Cadmus and Tiresias make what at first appears to be the “comic” adjustment to Dionysiac festival, shrugging off old age in dance; yet Cadmus finally pays a penalty for the god’s success. Pentheus, however, by resisting the god, inverts a potentially comic outcome. He is destroyed while enacting what might be termed a parody of the comic plot actually achieved by Dionysus. The comic hero often radically transforms himself to succeed in his desires and to save his city heroically. Pentheus abandons his plans to don armor and fight for his city in favor of satisfying his personal curiosity; at the same time he interprets his dressing as a woman as heroic (962–63) and deserving of honor and celebration on his return (see 967–70). Once certain of his ability to mock the god or his converts (286, 322, 1081, 1293),

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31 For discussions of the comic or trickster hero in Old Comedy and elsewhere, see Whitman 1964 and Salingar 1974. See *Tractatus Coislinianus* 6 on the importance of *apate* in comedy. Revenge and rescue plots overlap in their common concern with plotting and deception.
The *Bacchae*

Pentheus becomes not a hero but the object of divine *gelōs*, laughter and scorn (250, through Cadmus, and 503, 842, 854).32

In the *Bacchae* the same pattern of events is to the smiling god and his chorus a “comic” celebration of Pentheus’ exposure and defeat as an enemy to festival, and to the appalled second messenger and to Pentheus’ family an occasion for tragic pity and lament. In sum, the god has enacted a comic plot pattern and, wearing a smiling mask, defeats his enemy in an *agōn* and concludes his victory with a festive *kōmos*. But once Dionysus’ play is concluded, Pentheus’ perverted sacrificial death and fruitless *peripeteia* and *anagnōrisis* (*kakou gar engus Ón emanthanen*, 1113; 1115–19), accompanied by the inability of the maddened participants to pity their victim, can be read as an abortive tragic action. Agave reaches and survives the full tragic *anagnōrisis* of her *peripeteia* and her error in failing to recognize the god denied to Pentheus (*Dionusos hēmas ōles*, *arti manthanô*, 1296; see also Cadmus at 1297, 1344, and 1346). She accepts her fate, although she wishes never to see a *thursos* again (1381–86). She now sees the mask of Pentheus as human—the representation of her son and a cause for *penthos*, not bestial and a cause for triumph. Cadmus now calls the *phonos* (slaughter, 1114) of Pentheus a *thuma* (sacrifice, 1246), hence re-establishing a sacrificial perspective on the king’s death. Lamenting Pentheus, he sadly recalls the overzealous youth’s past kindnesses to him (1311–22). The second messenger is Pentheus’ first sympathetic defender in the play (1032–33, 1039–40), and the first besides Pentheus to champion the men of the city (1036, if the text is correct), who have hitherto been silent or converted to the god. He mourns the collapse of the royal house (1024–28). The adjective *perissos* (extraordinary, excessive), formerly used of men like Pentheus (429), is now applied to Agave’s revenge (1197). The implication of these final scenes seems to be that the gods may impose patterns of action on men, but that tragedy emerges from a

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32Sacrificial and tragic victims may also be mocked, but here the combination of vocabulary (*gelōs* and *kōmos*), the god’s smiling mask, and the god’s dramatic strategies suggest the idea if not the tone of Old Comedy, as well as the traditional disgrace of being ridiculed by one’s enemies. I share a sense of the tone of these comic scenes with Seidensticker 1978. See also Dodds 1960, esp. 192.
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strictly human (and sane) perspective; the human and humane experience and vision of Pentheus’ family and of the second messenger invent tragedy from the divine “comedy.”

Dionysus, then, does not merely borrow from the plot structure and stage business of comedy to make his theatrical demonstration of divinity. As the god who presides over both comedy and tragedy in the dramatic festivals, he dissolves and transcends the boundaries between the comic and tragic genres. Dionysus makes his victims see with pleasure what the sane mind would experience as painful. Pentheus would like to see what causes him distress (815); the mad Agave will think herself free from misfortune when she is actually supremely unfortunate (1259–62; see also the contrast between 1232 and 1258). Plato in the *Philebus* (48c–49c5) suggests in a very complex passage that tragedy and comedy are united by a concern with self-knowledge. Comic delusion is accompanied by weakness; ignorance in those who have the ability to retaliate is hateful and ugly. Pentheus’ situation, as he moves from a supposed position of strength to one of weakness, falls uncomfortably between the hateful and the ridiculous; the god’s apparent “comic weakness” at first obscures a hateful strength. Similarly, the audience, trapped through comic/tragic irony and a partial identification with the god’s cause (for it knows that Pentheus is wrong), is torn between fear and horrified laughter at the king’s delusions. Until the final scenes the god thus denies clear access either to the comic laughter or to the tragic pity by which the spectators control their theatrical experience. They neither maintain the intellectuality, the emotional alienation, and the sense of collective understanding by which comedy attempts to exclude and thereby correct the rigid and misguided member of society with mockery in the manner eloquently described by Bergson; nor can they feel full pity and fear for Pentheus as a being better than but dangerously similar to themselves.

In Plato’s *Symposium* (223d3–9) Socrates argues with Aristophanes and Agathon that tragedy and comedy could be written by the same man. Socrates is presumably championing an unlikely cause. Or he might equally be alluding with characteristic irony to a fin-

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33Bergson 1956.
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de-siècle consciousness about the two genres. Aristophanes, famous throughout his career for his parodies of Euripides (Cratinus frag. 307 K mocks Aristophanes for this habit), suggests in the Frogs that the health and nature of both theatrical genres are intricably linked. A good comedy should contain, as the Eleusinian initiates say of their rites, a judicious mixture of seriousness and mockery (391–95). Aristophanes, in this unusually serious comedy, uses a theatrical Dionysus to make statements about the complex relation between the genres and to defend the value of dramatic poetry to the city (Frogs 1419, 1500–1503). Euripides, too, by allowing the god of theater to make his own theatrical demonstrations of divinity, reveals the shared ground between apparently opposing genres, the common preoccupation with human ignorance and pretension, with relief from suffering, with agon and the exposure of human violence and aggression, and with demonstrating the gap between man’s godlike desires and his ability to achieve them. In the Bacchae Dionysus brings “drama” to birth in Thebes as an experience and a form in which boundaries are transgressed and cultural categories and oppositions temporarily reversed and collapsed. Comedy allows its heroes to cross the boundaries separating man and god, the socially encumbered individual and his heroic desires; its audiences revel harmlessly in mockery, revenge, a delight in exposure, and a free identification with the initially underdog protagonist. The god’s “comedy,” with its Dionysian audience, the chorus, is revealed to be in many ways a more terrifying form of the genre. Yet when the god has withdrawn from the level of human action to the machine or theologeion, Euripides’ tragedy frames and changes the audience’s emotional response to the divine drama. The final scenes restore (or, from the historical perspective, create) the traditional boundaries between genres, drawing a sharp and specifically tragic line between man and god, the individual and his heroic aspirations, audience and protagonist, and between laughter and tragic pity. Nevertheless, the failure of the chorus to move fully toward a tragic perspective (to feel pity and fear over the fate of Pentheus); the lack of closure resulting from Dionysus’ final puzzling prophecies of future punishments, pronounced from the machine; and the patent and possibly avoidable folly of the ever-combative Pen-
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Theus (he has expressed even his filial piety in the willingness to take revenge) cast in the final moments the lingering shadow of the divine comedy over the recovery of tragic vision.

Festival and Theater

In festival the distinctions that normally define a society are temporarily transformed or suppressed. Most Greek festivals, for example, permitted the participation of women, who had no place in the political and military life of the city, and sometimes of strangers, metics, and even slaves. Hierarchy may give way to a world in which each individual in a community is more closely the "equal" of others, allowed to "be himself," to release psychobiological urges in submission to ritual rather than to control them in submission to secular authority. Old Comedy's stress on obscenity and aggression is but one of many Attic examples. Status, name, property, and kin position may no longer carry the same weight; nor do distinctions of age or sex. The weak, the inferiors in the community hierarchy, may rule and have the power to restore fertility to society. Women's festivals in Athens could invert the normal procedures of civic life; political business was suspended during the Thesmophoria, which occupied civic space for rituals concerning fertility. Rulers or other scapegoat figures may be humiliated or punished (as in the Attic Thargelia). What Turner calls communitas emerges where structure is not. Spontaneous energy is released; the forces that bind a community together with warmth and feeling and loyalty but are not formally or fully built into the organization of the community are celebrated. Both Thucydides (2.38) and Plato (Laws 653d) testify to the powers of festival to restore communal energy. A new lan-

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34 Many of the theoretical points made here were formulated in cross-cultural studies of festival in ritual cultures. Although I am certain that it could be done (the fictional example presented in the Bacchae itself conforms explicitly to this scenario), to support every detail with examples of festivals from attested Greek contexts would be too ambitious an undertaking here. For the element of the carnivalesque at the City Dionysia, especially in relation to Aristophanes, see Brelich 1969b and Carrière 1979.

guage and vision may temporarily hold sway. As in the Eleusinian and other mysteries, ideas are expressed in symbol, myth, and metaphor; actions are ritualized. In this state, as Turner says, regular social structure is simplified, inverted, or distanced, and Levi-Straussian "structures" are amplified, permitting scrutiny of the culture as a whole. But this state of communidades is not simply a return to "nature." It is "nature in dialogue with structure." In its controlled form festival is a reconstructive phase of society, operating according to strict ritual logic, in which the culture is modified through a confrontation of individuals as equals and an opportunity to observe social structures from another perspective. Douglas stresses that "cults . . . invite their initiates to turn round and confront the categories on which their whole surrounding culture has been built up and to recognize them for the fictive, man-made, arbitrary creations that they are." The return to normalcy from the festal state ideally brings, then, a renewed sense of the arbitrariness yet necessity of the existing cultural order. Ritual cultures depend on successive phases of structure and communidades, and each ultimately contributes to maintaining the vitality of that culture. Again, to quote Douglas:

Order implies restriction; . . . This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolizes both danger and power.

Ritual recognizes the potency of disorder. In the disorder of the mind, in dreams, faints and frenzies, ritual expects to find powers and truths which cannot be reached by conscious effort. Energy to command and special powers of healing come to those who can abandon rational control for a time.

Cadmus founded Thebes with the help of the purely military Spartoi; Pentheus is the second ruler, and, true to his heritage, he

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36Ibid., 133 and 167.
37Ibid., 140.
39Ibid., 114; see also Turner 1969: 177 and 203. Turner stresses the equality of individuals as human beings in festival even though they may be unequal in terms of social status or in other respects.
Ritual Irony

relies exclusively on force and his hoplites to maintain order. Thebes has apparently not yet experienced the full benefits of festival. The religion that Dionysus brings to the militarized bastion of early Thebes offers the festal benefits described above and makes similar claims to being essential to the proper functioning of culture. The old can be temporarily rejuvenated; women can leave the confined internal space of the home and move about unhampered by marriage and children; pain can be released in wine, song, and dance; peace reigns. As Green puts it: “Ritual is, we know, one of the manifestations that elucidate the subordination of desire to the universe of rules. It is a return of the repressed that enables us to witness, through certain ritual practices, the disguised expressions of desires whose prohibition would be absolute if they were expressed outside the limits of the ritual.” By adopting new garments and new movements the participant can take on another role. In accepting the god’s myths and symbols he may see the world differently and express this change of state with a special ritual vocabulary. The god’s costume suggests that of a structural inferior, woman; his thursoi and fawnskins are emblems of a ritual power that can overcome manmade metal weapons. As the chorus emphasizes, the wisdom of Dionysus is the wisdom of the masses, of the whole community: his followers speak with one voice (725). The god argues that if the city accepts his worship and the inversions it brings it could enter into a special state of bliss and atemporality (see especially 1341–43).

The world into which Dionysus brings Pentheus is both an inversion of ordinary society and a celebration of “nature in dialogue with structure.” As Green puts it: “The Dionysiac ritual, then, is not a natural ritual; on the contrary, it is the culturation of

40Dionysiac rites claimed therapeutic effect in many contexts. Cybele’s drums purified Dionysus of the madness imposed on him by Hera (Apollodorus 3.5.1). At Laws 790d–791b, Plato compares lullabies and Bacchic music: mothers sing their children to sleep, and Bacchic followers are brought to a sane state of mind by music (but see 85tc for the undesirable effects of frenzied Bacchic modes). For katharsis in Aristotle, with extensive bibliography on the issue, see Else 1957: 224–32 and 423–47. Given the therapeutic effects of music, it is not surprising that Euripides makes analogies between music and sacrifice, especially purificatory sacrifice.

41Green 1979: 170; see also 171.
the natural. If the cultural excludes it, the punishment of the god will fall.”42 Outside the city is a world in which the ecstatic women are in control; they reject the marriage, agriculture, technology, and sacrifice of the city. Their symbols are taken from the wild world, not from the domestic one. They have powers not available to them in ordinary life. Yet this world of antistructure is by no means disordered or totally undifferentiated, but is organized according to a different set of meaningful ritual rules. The maenads are divided into three groups each with a leader, comparable to the actual structure of maenadic tiiaso. Their sacrifice resembles, though it perverts, the civic norm; it symbolizes the unity of their group and separates outsiders from insiders. Agave, as priestess, gets the choice sacrificial portion (she tears off Pentheus’ arm first, 1125–27). Both messengers observe and emphasize that the women behave with tremendous order (see especially 693). Certainly, the environment on Cithairon is vulnerable to a movement to uncontrolled violence. As Girard has argued (see Chapter I), Euripides in the Bacchae takes festival back to its violent origins.43 In contrast to the women on the mountain, the chorus, when it presents the worship of Dionysus to the city, offers the experience of festival in a benign and controlled form. The Asian women sing, dance, and present new myths and symbols to the city; their violence is exclusively verbal. As in the Bacchae, ritual experience generally has the potential to combine constructively the comic and the tragic. As Turner puts it:

status reversal does not mean “anomic” but simply a new perspective from which to observe structure. Its topsyturviness may give a humorous warmth to this ritual viewpoint. If the liminality of life-crisis rites may be, perhaps audaciously, compared to tragedy—for both imply humbling, stripping, and pain—the liminality of status reversal may be compared to comedy, for both involve mockery and inversion, but not destruction, of structural rules and overzealous adherents to them.44

42Ibid., 171.
43Girard 1977.
44Turner 1969: 201.
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It is Pentheus who, by rejecting festival in the more civilized form in which Dionysus offers it to the city, is punished by being taken outside the city to experience the same phenomenon in an uncontrolled and violent form.

According to Girard, the Bacchae presents the creation of a divinity through the displacement of the mass violence used in the sacrifice of a scapegoat onto Dionysus himself. The play opens with a “sacrificial crisis,” an effacement of social differences and of the difference between human and divine, which Pentheus diagnoses as a disease; following the destruction of the scapegoat it closes with the affirmation of divinity. For Girard, however, the play remains problematic because it takes an ambivalent stance, neither fully displacing violence onto the god nor restoring it to men. The play stops short of a full demystification of the secret of primitive religion, of the “double illusion of a violent divinity and an innocent community.”45 Thus Euripides does not conclude the play by emphasizing the logical restoration of peace through the unanimous lynching of the king. Instead, the final scenes create pity for the protagonists, raise questions about the nature of Dionysus’ divinity, and leave the audience confused about how to judge its dramatic experience. The language and structure of the ritual arouse the expectation of ritual’s solidifying effects, but the overall structure and perspective of the play systematically frustrate them.

In part, as Girard sees, the play creates its ambivalent effect by making what is essentially a diachronic process (the dramatic presentation of the historical creation of a divinity through violence) a synchronic one. Dionysus, the chorus, and Tiresias present to Pentheus the benefits of his religion in an anachronistically positive form. The promise of the civilized future precedes or merges inextricably with the violence of the mythical past, so that cause and result are permanently confused. The anachronistic choral odes stand at the center of this ambiguity. On the one hand, the language and movement of the choral odes maintain a continuous relation to the plot. The Asian women, as worshipers of the god, present the god’s religion to the city, suffer his trials, perceive his

The *Bacchae*

miracles, share his release, and finally, in the fourth stasimon, identify directly with and anticipate the destructive act of their mad counterparts on the mountain. On the other hand, these Asian bacchants also press the audience to make complex connections and comparisons between the ritualized spectacle of Pentheus’ failure to accept the god and the festivities and excesses of contemporary Attic democracy. The role of the chorus raises many of the same issues raised in the three earlier plays considered in this book. In the *IA* and the *Phoenissae* the choral odes created a world of myth and ritual in tangent to the corrupt political world of the action, but intersecting with it at a crucial point where idealistic youth takes ritual as a model for action. In the *Heracles* past myths at first seem irrelevant to the life of the *polis*. Following an explosive contact between the world of myth and reality, Theseus intervenes to incorporate Heracles and his myths into the Athenian *polis*. The *Bacchae* again asks what it means to absorb myth and ritual, this time Dionysiac myth and ritual, into the life of a *polis*. As Arthur puts it: “Euripides has focused in the play not on the Dionysiac element itself, but rather on how the *polis* incorporates elements (such as the Dionysiac) which are hostile to it and on how it sustains (or does not sustain) itself against its own contradictions.” By the final scenes the actions of the god and the attitude and vision presented by the chorus, who do integrate myth, ritual, and reality, come to seem utterly suspect. How does the participant in and spectator of myth and festival draw boundaries between himself and these events?

The chorus, as Arthur in particular has argued, presents an apology for traditional Greek morality, for the philosophy of *to sophon* (wisdom) and *mēden agan* (nothing in excess). The early choral odes describe the blessings of a Hellenized Dionysus already incorporated by the *polis*. The later stasima show how easily the language and ideals of establishment morality “can be accommodated to an opposite system of values.” Revenge becomes identified

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47 Arthur 1972. See also Deichgräber 1935 for a treatment of the odes that emphasizes their relation to contemporary sophistic thought and politics.
48 Arthur 1972: 165. See also de Romilly 1963 and Winnington-Ingram 1948 on the ambiguous language of the god and his chorus.
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with loveliness, wisdom, freedom, escape, the god’s smile, and values expressive earlier in the play of a society at peace. Through the chorus we see that in a city under control Dionysus emerges in symposia and in civic festivals as a celebration of the democracy’s freedom from political hierarchy and rigid control of personal behavior, and as an appropriate release from care. Dionysiac rite and myth can complement the political aims of a democracy and guard against the institution of tyranny. The chorus repeatedly emphasizes that Dionysus is the god of the many and not of the perissoi phōtes (extraordinary men, 429). The many know how to live the “life of apolitical quiet” (ho de tas hēsuchias / biotos, 389–90) and how to be sensible (to phronein, 390). Yet in a city under pressure, pushed to excess, he appears behind the corrosive pressure of the democratic majority for revenge and for the destruction of outstanding men. Thucydides, too, in his famous analysis of the Corcyrean revolt (3.82–84), treats the thirst for revenge as the most important manifestation of a disintegrating democracy. He, too, remarks on the radical redefinition, in such circumstances, of traditionally positive ethical language to justify unethical causes. On the other hand, his Pericles in the funeral oration celebrates the need for festive release in a well-functioning democracy (2.38). The Bacchae seems to hover between exposing the violence inherent in Greek social life, divinity, and festival and the celebration of festival as a reconstructive phase of society necessary to its health and well-being.

Similarly, the claim of drama (explicit in comedy and by implication in tragedy) to release or expose sexuality and aggression, to attack society by showing it in a state of inversion, yet to do so without harm, and indeed with positive therapeutic benefit, is intimately tied to an exploration of the relation of festival to society. To defend or attack the inversions of festival and the social harmony created through the violence of sacrifice is ultimately to defend or attack tragedy, a poetic form that grew out of these rituals and remains a part of them by borrowing from ritual in its structure, language, and imagery and in its ability to restore and reunite society through the experience of the ritualized violence presented in its myths. The parabases of comedy claim to teach men how properly to praise and blame, but they also playfully defend sexuality and aggressive political satire in the plays. Aristo-
The Bacchae

phanes’ drama wittily and unregretfully undercuts his claim in the parabases to be cleaner and more constructive than his fellow comic playwrights. The tragic poets from Aeschylus onward (Prometheus 631–34), aware in advance of the kind of critical debate they were to evoke in the philosophers, call attention to the pleasurable or therapeutic effects of experiencing what is painful.49

Pentheus’ attempt to exclude festival and its benefits from his recently formed and crudely hierarchical city is expressed primarily as a failure of sight, or a failure to benefit from theoria.50 He insists that to believe in Dionysus he must see the god directly and at first hand, not indirectly and symbolically (the god shows himself to Pentheus in disguised form): “You say that you really saw the god? What sort of being was he?” he asks at 477. Or, in lines 501–2:

P. And where is he? He is not manifest to my eyes at least.
D. Here by me; but you, being impious yourself, cannot look on him.

Pentheus seems repeatedly unable to see or hear the implications of the speeches, sounds, or images presented to him. At the same time he responds unconsciously to the god’s message as he is lured to the mountain by a desire to see or spy upon the god’s forbidden rites (811–16, 829, 838, 916, 956, 1060–62), although in fact he is never allowed to see the sacred activities of the maenads on the mountain (1060, 1075) until the moment of his recognition and death.

When Pentheus is finally costumed and maddened by Dionysus he comes onstage with a new and double vision. He sees two Thebes, two suns; he sees, as the god says, what he ought to see (924):

You seem to lead on ahead of us as a bull and to have grown horns on your head. (920–21)

49See Pucci 1980 for the therapeutic effects of pain in Euripides.
50For an excellent treatment of the language of sight in the play, see Massenzio 1969: 82–91. Among other points, he contrasts Dionysiac sight with Pentheus’ narrower and more superficial desire to spy.
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Pentheus’ ability to see only one level of reality continues in his state of madness; he simply substitutes the beast for the smiling mask (although he continues to be aware of the stranger’s non-bestial side, just as Agave is later unconsciously aware that the head of the “beast” she carries is also human, 1185–87). His sight changes and he has access to a vision of divine power unavailable to him before, but it brings no insight. He is unaware of the implication that this bestial image has for himself. He cannot, like the god or the comic hero, “see” and control his transformation at the same time. In contrast, the chorus of believers caps this scene by evoking a double image of the god, impossible to normal vision, as a beast with a smiling face or mask (prosōpon) (1018–23):

Appear to our sight as a bull or a many-headed snake or a fire-blasting lion. Go, O Bacchus. With a smiling face cast your noose about the hunter of the Bacchants as he falls under the deadly herd of the maenads.

The language and action of the play demonstrate the god’s divinity indirectly and symbolically and deny that humans can adequately “see” Dionysus. The god can take any shape he wants (478) but is not fully visible to the human eye. Seeing the god, as the contrast between the vision of Pentheus and of the chorus shows, is a matter of “double sight.” In fact, even the chorus and the maenads on the mountain only hear, but do not see, their god directly. (A light also symbolizing the god’s presence appears at 1082–83.) He is a being who can successively or simultaneously appear as divine, animal, and human.

Pentheus defines the world through the hierarchical and rigidly antithetical structures of his society, not through the nonstructures or antistructures of ritual and festival. For him man and woman, for example, are rigidly separate categories (822); each sex has its own sphere (217); one is subordinate to the other (786). Dionysus as festival god can simultaneously invert and subvert these cultural categories: language, the role of the sexes, classes, and political hierarchy. To understand Dionysus is to understand that the order

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51 It is unclear precisely what Pentheus sees at 920–21—the stranger and his double with horns (Dodds 1960: 193); a stranger who is part man, part bull; or a bull who he realizes is also the stranger. On 1185–87, see Dodds 1960: 224.
The Bacchae

imposed upon the world by human culture is created by that culture, and that the permanent potential exists for a reversal or collapse of this order. To accept him is to understand that festival and ritual can offer this knowledge in a form that ultimately supports rather than destroys the existing social structure.

In the Bacchae the same words or symbols can have two apparently incompatible connotations in the minds of supporters or opponents of the god, or at two different dramatic moments. Sophia, sophos, and to sophon, for example, mean something entirely different to Tiresias or the chorus as defenders of the god, and to Pentheus as a defender of the existing cultural order; the chorus uses these terms in so many seemingly incompatible contexts that the audience loses any certainty of what they mean to the god’s worshipers (see especially 480, 655–56; 203, 824, 1190; 395, 877–97, 1005). A thursos may at one point be a magic wand providing food and sustenance, at another point a weapon; at a third point this symbol of Dionysus’ power loses its force and must be regarlanded (1054–55) before it becomes once more something other than a mere branch. Pentheus not only fails to see and interpret symbols; he also remains unaware of, or fatally resistant to, the fact that visual or linguistic signs can refer to more than one valid level of meaning at once. Unlike Dionysus (and the audience) he has no sense of irony or metaphor.

Pentheus’ terrifying transformation from spectator to spectacle shows in an extraordinarily theatrical form what it means to act or imitate without full knowledge. The god, unlike the tragic hero, never confuses representation with reality; instead he controls reality through representation. Contrast, for example, Pentheus’ reactions in the stable scene and the god’s open declaration, in the prologue and elsewhere, about how he will use disguise, madness, and illusion to achieve his ends. By using language on multiple levels and exploiting the physical accoutrements of theater and/or Dionysiac cult, he can manipulate and transform the world to create an upside-down festal experience.\textsuperscript{52} Whereas the audience

\textsuperscript{52}All these aspects of the play seem to be characteristic of Greek mystery cults; Eleusinian mysteries also used riddling language, symbols, and some kind of dramatic performance. Seaford 1981 suggests that the Bacchae makes references to the Dionysiac mysteries comparable to those made to the Eleusinian mysteries in Aeschylus’ Oresteia.
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can distinguish visual illusion from reality in the palace scene, the tragic hero, or, from the divine perspective, the “comic victim,” is destroyed through his confinement to one level of language and sight and to the cultural context in which he exists. In short, most Greek tragedy unfolds as a kind of initiation into the mysteries of the divine and the mysteries of the self, which can include a kind of symbolic or actual sacrificial death (sacrificial in part because sacrifice defines a point of intersection in the relations between man and god, man and society). Yet the audience’s experience of tragic irony in the *Bacchae* expands to encompass a confrontation not only with individual identity or the nature of the divine but also with the whole contradictory structure of human social existence.

Dionysus and the chorus present to Thebes the possibility that his festivals can express this potential for a reversal of the cultural order in a controlled and revitalizing form; the early scenes offer multiple demonstrations that the spectator who can understand reality (and especially divinity) through representation retains distance and identity and may return without disaster to ordinary life. The “play” or festival on the mountain perverts the drama as it has been observed up to this point. The benign (*ēpiōtatos*) god of theater can by implication present drama and myths as a constructive part of the social and political life of the city; the terrible (*deinotatos*) god presides over comparable festive reversals of normality and identity outside the limits of the city and of civilized control. Thus, while Pentheus merely *imagines* that he “suffers terribly” (*peptonha deina, 642*) in his duel with the image created by the god, he is still safe; but on the mountain he is utterly destroyed. The first messenger speech gives Pentheus the precise scenario for his own death and a chance, by learning through presentation, to avoid it; here animals, not humans, are torn apart; the myth of Actaeon serves to warn the king of his fall in advance; and the maenads, if left undisturbed, can act in an orderly and peaceful fashion.\(^{53}\) Here the messenger learns from his experience to accept Dionysus’ divinity, although the king cannot. The initial debates (*agōnes*) between man and god become Pentheus’ hopeless struggles (*agōnes*) on the

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53Dodds 1960: 167–68 suggests that the traditional story of the herdsman and the maenads would have been celebrated in ritual and dance.
mountain. The maenads literally see the king as a beast and tear him apart; unlike the chorus, they become with Pentheus actors in the play, not spectators of the action. In contrast, the chorus, as spectators, simply imagine Pentheus as a beast; in the fourth stasimon, where they envisage Pentheus’ death, they participate, but indirectly and hence without harm, in the god’s revenge on Pentheus. Finally, the chorus’ single-minded and pitiless identification with the god’s “play” is not that of Euripides’ play, for the audience has access in the final scenes to a double reading of the god’s drama that encompasses both a divine (“comic”) and a humane (“tragic”) reading of the same events. The audience sees, then, all levels of participation in and experience of the same events, from the complete failure to retain control, represented by madness, and the chorus’ overidentification, to Tiresias’ controlled participation as spectator with sufficient understanding (like that of an audience experiencing tragic irony) to survive his experience without negative consequences.

The play, by emphasizing the possibility that Dionysus may be safely incorporated into civilized life or that the mere spectator of rather than the actor in Dionysiac theater may benefit from tragic experience, offers an implicit justification for the seemingly subversive role of festival and tragedy in civilized life. The sacrifices made by art and ritual substitute for actual violence. At the same time, Euripides seems to subvert this claim. The chorus, as spectators who identify too closely with the divine revenge and who travesty the language of ethical moderation, are clear reminders of continuing contemporary excesses in the Athenian political scene. Furthermore, although the play thoroughly debunks the traditional anthropomorphic assumptions about Greek divinity, Cadmus, by insisting to the god that his revenge was just but excessive—gods should not be like mortals in their wrath (1348)—shows how little he, as well as the chorus, has learned from Pentheus’ tragic disaster. In the final scene Agave and Cadmus turn away from ritual and myth, which are left to Dionysus and the chorus, in favor of rational speech. Yet no form of speech—the cynical opportunism of Cadmus, the sophistry of Tiresias, the literalism of Pentheus, the riddling language of the initiated offered by the disguised god, the ritualized and mythical language of the
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chorus—earlier offered a means to capture fully or to control the experience inspired by the elusive god. Is the spectator forced to conclude that the god’s nonverbal communication of his divinity is equally ambivalent and inadequate? An examination of the theatrical effect created by the god’s own mask provides further insight into these larger contradictions offered by the play as a whole.

Dionysus’ Mask

In the prologue Dionysus announces that he will manifest himself to Thebes in human disguise and reveal himself as a god to the city. To do so he has put on a human *morphē* (shape) or *phusis* (nature). He redundantly emphasizes (4–5 and 53–54) his donning of this human disguise. Why does Euripides make Dionysus draw attention to this point? Presumably he must clarify for the audience some visual confusion about the god and his costume. Using the aorist participle (*ameipsas*, 4), the god says he has “put on” mortal shape. The use of the aorist followed by a main verb in the present tense (*pareimē*, 5) suggests that he appears onstage already disguised as mortal, although the audience is required to accept this figure as a god (1–2):

54Pentheus’ inability to comprehend Tiresias, Dionysus, the *therapōn*, and the first messenger reflects not only his *amathia* but also the impossibility of communicating the Dionysiac phenomenon verbally. The god’s violence and the final scene make clear that even the audience, with the benefit of hindsight, cannot accept the words of the god and his chorus as fully adequate to the experience represented in the play. The juxtaposition of the chorus’ and Tiresias’ explanation of Dionysus’ birth also raises questions about both views. On Tiresias’ speech, which I view as deliberately inadequate, see esp. Deichgräber 1935, Rohdich 1968, esp. 143–47, Winnington-Ingram 1948: 48–58, Conacher 1967a: 62–64.

55No scholar has in my view convincingly explained away this redundancy on textual grounds. Willink 1966: 30–31 admits that there are no strong linguistic grounds for condemnation. “To defend 53–54 is to believe that Euripides spoilt his own elaborate structure” in the prologue, “and that, too, with a doubly tautologous couplet (repeating [line] 4), introduced by a repetitive conjunction, following a clause which it could not logically follow.” My point here is that the repetition is meant to be functional and emphatic. See also line 914, where the god reminds the audience that the feminine figure seen entering is indeed the disguised Pentheus.
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I have come, the child of Zeus, to the Theban land, Dionysus.

Yet does this figure with the smiling mask (as we know from lines 439 and 1021) look mortal? Although we know little of tragic masking conventions in the fifth century B.C., we can safely assume that most masks representing human beings in tragedy were not smiling.56 Moreover, although gods regularly appear in prologues and epiphanies, they rarely dominate the praxis of tragedies.57 This is apparently not true of tragedies about Dionysus, in which the god is presenting his divinity to those who have not yet recognized him. Yet the continual presence onstage of this divine smile was not so commonplace as to have lost its capacity to express the gulf between god and man.58 The masks of other gods in Greek tragedies are never described in the text as smiling. Yet if, as seems probable, the smiling mask was a convention for deities, or for Dionysus alone, rather than an Euripidean innovation, no earlier poet, so far as we know, called attention to it so emphatically and developed it so explicitly.

Dodds explains the textual redundancy here as the poet’s means “of making it quite clear to the audience that the speaker, whom

56For the scanty evidence concerning fifth-century as opposed to later tragic masks, see Pickard-Cambridge 1968: chap. 4. Even in the fourth century the more stylized masks of the principal tragic or even upper-class comic characters are never described or pictured in art as smiling. There are no other direct references to masks in classical tragedy, and even in comedy it is difficult to abstract precise information on the nature of masks from the texts. I am assuming that masks and costumes could be seen by the audience; even if the spectators in the last rows of the theater in fifth-century Athens had a very distant view of the actors, theatrical productions are not designed for those in the back row. Scholars have made far too much of this point. For an audience that knows what to expect—such as those in a modern football or baseball stadium—small details can be apprehended even if they are not clearly seen. And in this case the text serves to clarify the visual experience by calling attention to it.

57Divine appearances were usually confined to prologues and epilogues. Dionysus took part in the action of Aeschylus’ Lycurgeta, and this participation may have been typical in tragedies about Dionysus. Other divine interventions in the action of tragedies occur in Euripides’ Rhesus, Aeschylus’ Psychostasia and Xantirae, Euripides’ Heracles, and possibly Sophocles’ Niobe. Aeschylus’ Eumenides and Prometheus Bound have divine protagonists.

58For further helpful comments on the god’s smiling mask, see esp. Rosenmeyer 1963: 106–10 and Dodds 1960 on line 439. See also Meautis 1923: 181–82 on the contrast between the masks of Pentheus and Dionysus.
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they accept as a god, will be accepted as a man by the people on the stage." 59 Dionysus thus enters the play poorly disguised as human, in the fashion of Homeric gods or the testing god of folktale. 60 His mask (and perhaps also his costume) is not, by the conventions of Greek tragedy, human. Therefore, simply by his costume he manifests his godhead, his unhumaness to the audience. The tragic irony for which the play is justly famous has a visual level. That is, the audience sees by his mask that the stranger is a god, but Pentheus has no such theatrical cues by which to recognize him. The audience is being asked to be conscious of a costume and a theatrical convention. Thus, for the audience Dionysus’ mask represents smiling divinity in human disguise; for the characters, a man. One mask represents two meanings in a manner that captures the central irony of the dramatic action.

Jones has eloquently argued in On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy that the ancient mask was meant to be a fully adequate means of representing character: unlike the modern mask, ancient tragic masks “did not owe their interest to the further realities lying behind them, because they declared the whole man.” 61 In accordance with this convention, the Greek tragic audience should not be required to “peer behind the mask and demand of the actor that he shall cease merely to support the action, and shall begin instead to exploit the mask in the service of inwardness.” When “the mind’s construction” cannot be found in the face, masking becomes pointless. Jones’s argument concerning the identity between mask and character for the ancient poet is confirmed not only by most of the known tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles (such characters as Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra are possible exceptions) but also by post-fifth-century visual representations of poets, who are shown composing while looking at masks. 62 Jones argues that

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59 Dodds 1960 in his note on 53–54 also includes the views of previous commentaries.

60 See Rose 1956 on divine disguisings in Homer, and Burnett 1970: 24–25 on the theme in the Bacchae.

61 Jones 1962: 45. The following paragraph summarizes aspects of the argument made by Jones on 45–46 and 270.

62 For an excellent treatment of this issue with examples from art, see Webster 1965. Aristophanes also suggests that costumes can be a comparable form of inspiration for poetic composition (Acharnians 411–16 and Thesmophoriazusae 148–52).
Euripides’ career is uniquely marked by a whole range of “mask-piercing” and “mask-exploiting” effects that challenge the ancient masking convention. Euripides “pierces” masks by creating conflicts between a character’s internal state and his role in the action of the drama. Thus, Hippolytus’ tongue swears, but his mind remains unsworn (Hipp. 612). The mad Pentheus’ willingness to dress as a woman reveals an unkingly temperament. Agave, by envisioning Pentheus’ mask as a lion, apprehends, like the chorus, the bestial side of her son, the inner self that is at odds with his outer role; yet her sane vision restores his humanity. In these cases, then, “the mind’s construction” is no longer fully perceptible in the face or mask that the actor presents onstage.

In the case of Dionysus in the Bacchae, however, the poet moves away from the “mask-piercing” effects characteristic of his earlier work—that is, the exploitation of the action in the “service of inwardness” that comes close to undermining the tragic masking convention—to make the most original “mask-exploiting” gesture of his career. By convention a tragic mask represents one character and one meaning; yet Euripides has called attention to the fact that the smiling mask of the god represents different identities to characters and audience. In addition, as the action of the play continues, the precise nature of what the mask represents to the audience becomes increasingly ambiguous. Certainly it continues to represent divinity to the audience. Yet the visual effect of the smiling mask has the same doubleness as the language of the play itself. The eudaimonia promised by the chorus to the adherents of Dionysiac religion is horribly ironic when the same term is applied to Agave on her return from the mountain after the destruction of her son (1258). Similarly, the god’s mask remains smiling, but the visual effect of this smile does not remain consistent. The smile of the “gentle” stranger seems, from the human vantage point, to become by the end of the play a divine sneer, a ghoulish expression of inappropriate glee at a vengeance too easily executed. In short, Dionysus’ mask, by becoming ambiguous, comes to owe its interest not simply to what it formally represents in accordance with the normal tragic masking convention, but also to “the further realities lying behind,” the invisible forces that unite the benign and destructive aspects represented by the single sign of the god’s smiling mask. The mask, then, represents the god
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to the audience, misrepresents him to the characters, and, as we
shall see, in the final scene must be interpreted as an artifact or
symbol representing the god, or as much as the audience or the
characters can ever visually and directly experience of him.

Pentheus in his final mad scene with Dionysus sees double, two
suns and two Thebes. The audience also sees double in this scene,
though in a different way. Onstage are two feminine or feminized
figures wearing long robes and fawnskins, two figures carrying the
same Dionysiac paraphernalia. Each has long hair, although Pen­
theus’ is poorly confined in a mitra. In Aristophanes’ Frogs (46) and
in Pollux (4.116–17) Dionysus wears the krokōtos, a garment em­
phasizing his feminine side and, to the audience, his divinity. If
both Dionysus’ and Pentheus’ costumes were saffron, the audience
as well as Pentheus would see “two suns,” two brilliant yellow
costumes moving side by side. The sacrificial victim of the god,
here his contemporary and cousin, has visually become almost the
ritual double he often seems to have been in religious and literary
tradition.63 The god wears his costume and his ambivalent sexu­
ality with sinuous grace and authenticity. The human figure pa­
thetically parodies the divine in costume and movement; as often
in comedy, the feminine image is imperfectly imposed on the
masculine. Pentheus finds it awkward to assimilate what he has so
long resisted. Only the masks of the two figures remain for the
audience markedly different: one smiling and hence inhuman, the
other presumably unsmiling and, by tragic convention, human. At
this pivotal moment in the play the divine smile of the god Di­
onysus is set against the mask of Pentheus the man. The presenta­
tion of the two masks isolated side by side against the similarity of
the costumes visually anticipates in its significance the staging of
the final scene, the total split between man and god, which be­
comes so poignant when in typically Euripidean fashion (for ex­
ample, the Hippolytus) the characters are left to mourn with newly
clarified vision while the god looks down from above. The smiling

63 The god and his victim are mythological doubles for each other; the victim
dies in place of the god, and the god thus appears to escape death. See Hubert and
Mauss 1964 (1898): 77–94. For further examples in Greek myth of such doubling,
see Guépin 1968; and for a discussion of its possible anthropological significance,
see Girard 1977: chaps. 5 and 6.
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mask of the god suddenly retains no aspect of benignity, if indeed it had any before, beside the mask of the doomed and mortal Pentheus. Euripides has brilliantly exploited a poetic device known from Homer onward—Homer with his two worlds, one of inviolable and often comic gods, the other of struggling and mortal men. *Iliad* 1, for example, deliberately juxtaposes the two gatherings of men and gods, one dissolving into anger and disaster, the other into laughter; similarly, in *Iliad* 21 the comic battle between the gods contrasts with the deadly battle between men. The visual juxtaposition of the masks here also becomes a precise theatrical expression of the division between divine and human nature that lies at the heart of the play.

The mortal Pentheus survives in the *Bacchae* solely as the mask that represents the character in Greek theatrical convention. For the audience the mask remains Pentheus’ own despite his transformation by Dionysus in other respects, and finally it returns to the stage with Agave, fully recognizable even if, as some think, it was spattered with blood.64 (Tragic masks in the fifth century were apparently whole head masks with hair attached.65) Only to the mad Agave does Pentheus’ mask temporarily appear that of a lion, the victim of the glorious god and herself. Indeed, the text emphasizes this issue of the temporary distortion of what the mask represents by the use of the word *prosōpon* (face or mask, 1277). The conventional identification between the tragic figure and his mask formally corresponds to his dramatic situation. He cannot completely step outside of or internally withdraw from and control his character or his fate; he is strictly human. As Euripides’ staging brilliantly demonstrates, the tragic character is his mask, and is ultimately limited in the action to what his mask represents. In contrast, gods are not limited to representing one character, one role, one place in the family, society, and universe. They manipulate roles with a freedom found only in comedy, where the character’s mask may, as here, represent contradictory identities to the audience and the characters. This tragic convention is mocked in

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64Cult masks of Dionysus were hung on trees or pillars and sometimes daubed with red marks, probably indicating blood. See Pausanias 2.2.6 and Farnell 1909: V, 242–43.
65See note 56.
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Aristophanes' *Acharnians* when Dicaeopolis plays on it in a manner comparable to that of Dionysus in the *Bacchae*, as he says to the audience, parodying Euripides' *Telephus*:

> It is necessary for me to appear as a beggar today, to be as I am, but not appear to be so. The spectators know who I am but the chorus will be fools enough not to, so that I may jeer at them with my clever phrases.

(*Acharn. 440–44*)

By reducing Pentheus to his tragic mask and by allowing Dionysus to exploit his mask in an extraordinary way, Euripides demonstrates through theatrical convention the nature of the division between god and man.

Dionysus appears in his final epiphany no longer disguised as the stranger. He could, for example, have changed his mask and costume for the familiar and uneffeminate Zeus-like divinity shown on all but the most recent vase paintings. Yet given the rarity of costume change in Greek tragedy, I assume here (although my argument does not depend on this point) that the god has no need to change his mask or even his costume for his appearance on the *theologeion*, since both already represent his divinity to the audience.\(^6\) By now the audience has lost the superior position it had,

\(^6\)We cannot prove that mask change ever occurred in Greek tragedy. Critics have speculated, for example, on Dionysus' appearance in the scene where Pentheus sees the god as a bull, on the mask of Oedipus after his blinding in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, on the mask of Helen in the final scene of Euripides' *Helen*, and on the possible changing of masks by the Erinyes when they become Eumenides in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. Yet mask change without a highly stylized system of masks would probably be confusing to an audience, and fifth-century evidence suggests that masks were naturalistic and not, as later, stylized; see note 56 above. Hence it is safe, and probably safer, to assume that it did not occur here or elsewhere in fifth-century tragedy. Even in comedy disguised characters appear to change costume, not masks; Euripides' relative in the *Thesmophoriazusae* could have changed to a beardless mask when adopting a female disguise, but more probably he removed a beard from the mask he already wore. Certainly if the smiling mask was the (or a) conventional one for Dionysus, there would be no need for him to change masks when he appeared as a god. Costume change did occur in tragedy, as in the case of Pentheus in this play. On the other hand, the costume worn by the stranger probably appeared, like the mask, to be a typical costume for Dionysus, so that no costume change would have been necessary.
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in the form we call tragic irony, over Pentheus. The smiling mask now represents a divinity to both characters and audience. By suggesting throughout the action of the play that human beings have access to the god by theatrical means, through mask, costume, voice, and music, or through illusion, symbol, and transformation, Euripides seems to make a strong claim for art’s ability to represent a reality inaccessible to ordinary human sight. Thus, by means of the theatrical convention of a smiling mask (which is not human) the audience “sees” Dionysus’ divinity as the characters at first cannot. Yet finally, when it has become clear that Dionysus can be “seen” or apprehended only symbolically and indirectly by the theatrical means common to Dionysiac religion and Greek theater, he simply appears to the spectators, and to a city that has returned to sanity, in his divine form in the epiphany. By theatrical convention, the audience must accept the deus ex machina as an adequate and direct visual representation of the god. And, in fact, it has never ceased to see the god’s mask as divine. Yet the message of the action of the play is in tension with this final representation of the god. For if one mask represents different identities to characters and audience, if the smile that marks the mask means both benignity and destruction, and finally, if the mask in the epiphany can be understood only as a sign that represents forces that are in fact not directly accessible to the eye, then the audience can make sense of its theatrical experience only by becoming conscious of the god’s mask as a mask in the modern rather than in the ancient tragic theatrical mode. Euripides thus achieves in the audience a sense of the mask as transcending both its previous functions as the deceptive image of the illusory god and possibly alludes to the attested use of masks of Dionysus as actual cult objects. Here the poet reflects simultaneously his own ideas about tragic art and illuminates the mysteries of a ritual practice.67 Dionysus’ divinity

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67Evidence for the worship of Dionysus as a mask in Attic cult is substantial. Among many examples, the *kalpis* from Vulci signed by Hypsis, c. 510 B.C. (*ARV*2 30,2), is particularly appropriate for the *Bacchae* in that it portrays the worship of the mask of Dionysus in both his benign and bestial incarnations. See also Pickard-Cambridge 1968: 30–34 on the so-called Lenaia vases, or Athens National Museum 11749 for an example of vases illustrating Dionysus masks on a pillar.
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in the *Bacchae* and in cult can be understood through his power to control representation. Euripides makes his anomalous untragic mask become the central mocking image of what human beings understand about divinity.

The poet heightens the inscrutable effect of the god’s epiphany by making his final appearance so gratuitous to an already finished plot and so puzzling in respect to the prophecies he makes to Thebes.\(^6^8\)

Although the audience may “understand” that Dionysus is a god, and has come to realize with the protagonists a good deal more about the nature of this divinity than it had at the outset and a good deal more as well about how he must be grasped, it does not finally fully control this knowledge. As already noted, Cadmus, who from the beginning accepted the god more as a relative than as a divinity, cannot transcend his anthropomorphic vision of the god. The house of Cadmus, although it now accepts the god’s divinity, faces yet further inhuman punishments. The play is in a sense unfinished for both Thebes and the audience. The god makes clear that the repercussions of the events at Thebes will continue to be felt throughout Greece in the form of further barbarian incursions, perhaps even (given allusions to contemporary life in the choral odes) in fifth-century Athens.

Ritual in the *Bacchae*

In the *Bacchae*, the sacrificial death of Pentheus is located even more explicitly than in the *Heracles* and *Electra* within the larger civic context that includes festival, athletic agon, and very probably rites of initiation as well. The play capitalizes on and/or exposes the parallel structures and aims of these rituals; each aims at a symbolic control of violence and competitive energy, a limitation

\(^6^8\)On this point, see Winnington-Ingram 1948: 144–47: the deus ex machina is “spectacular but empty.” Perhaps Cadmus’ unenthusiastic reaction (1360–62) to Dionysus’ promise of the land of the blessed (*makarón t’ēs aian*, 1339) for himself and Harmonia is a further ironic comment on Dionysiac promises of bliss. The association of Dionysiac worship with bliss, peace, love, poetry, and escape from toil made repeatedly by the chorus is certainly not borne out either in the play or in contemporary Athens. See Dodds 1960 on 1330–39 for a discussion of Dionysus’ prophecies.

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in the relation between god and man and between man and man inside the city. Tragic sacrifice makes the participant come face to face with death and with the violence that is required to maintain his social and physical existence; it strips away the veneer of civilization maintained in the civic rite with its animal victim and turns the exploding violence of the participants onto a human victim. In the Bacchae the sacrificers experience the god (and ultimately their own violence) directly. The similarly controlled experience of divine power and success temporarily allowed to the athlete is here perverted as the boundaries between god and man and between the participants in the contest collapse. Behind Dionysus’ triumph lurk the pitiful inequality of god and man and the human inability to achieve more than temporary power and immortality. The experience of adolescent initiation, in which the individual departs from the city to confront it from the outside, through the experience of nature (and, through nature, a renewed confrontation and harmony with the mother), parallels that of festival, in which the individual temporarily steps out of his place in the social hierarchy and in history to confront the basic equality of all human beings, including men and women, masked by the structures and divisions of everyday life. As Turner argues, it is the dangerous experience of this unity and equality that allows the social system to function, and ultimately to take on a sense of necessity and order.

Sacrifice, agon, and festival are ritual experiences that help to define a society from both within and without: who is a legitimate participant in the society, and how power, privilege, and prestige will be allotted within it. In their sacrificial and agonistic crises the Heracles, the Bacchae, and the Electra deal with the entry of an outsider, Orestes or Heracles or Dionysus, into a potentially explosive social situation or with the relation between a king, a perissos phōs, and the people, including women, who are members of the society but not full participants in it. Contemporary Athenian democracy confronted these same issues: the contradictions between its aim for political equality among citizens and the exclusion of members of the society from full participation, the demands of the private sphere, the need for leadership, and the inevitable competitive pressure for power and prestige that was encouraged by the agonistically oriented heritage of Greek literature.
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Tragedy, as public and traditional literature, confronts these contradictions. Euripides places multiple explosions of rituals with parallel functions at the heart of his dramas. Through ritual he can bridge the gap between public and private, past and present, and between myth and contemporary democracy. Since all members of the society participate in ritual, if not in political life, through ritual he can raise issues that touch the society as a whole, not simply the narrow political sphere. He can draw on the structure and meaning of these rites as a timeless model of social order toward which his struggling plots and characters can aspire, and through which they can learn. Ritual provides both a model for social transition and a way of experiencing the society from outside its political organization. When successful, it either helps the participant adjust to the status quo (as in the IT or IA), finds a new place for an outsider within it (as in the Heracles), or expels those who cannot safely be incorporated. Finally, ritual becomes a structure that the poet’s own art can imitate, question, and occasionally strive to surpass.

In the Iphigenia in Aulis, ritual (marriage and sacrifice) offers to the imagination of the innocent Iphigenia a way to find meaning in her terrible experience and to offer unity to an agonistic (eristic and erotic), uncontrolled, and changeable public world. In the Phoenissae, the poet allows the mythical tradition about Thebes to disintegrate under the pressure of sophistry and the corrupted competition and individualism of contemporary society; and then, through the sacrifice of Menoeceus and the perspective of the choral poetry, the plot recovers, at least in part, the tradition and the movement toward myth and ritual that it has nearly abandoned. In the Heracles Euripides exploits the preoccupation with ἄγον of the poetic and mythical tradition of epic and epinician that preceded tragedy. Euripides’ Dionysiac (as the imagery of the peripety stresses) tragedy inverts the festive poetry of this tradition, and by destroying the hero of traditional myth through a monstrous sacrifice and ἄγον creates a hero for a democratic polis. In the Bacchae, Euripides takes tragedy back to its hypothetical origins in Dionysiac festival, sacrifice, and ἄγον. The festal experience introduced by the god is presented as a protodrama. The ἄγον of words between Pentheus and Dionysus degenerates into uncontrolled ag-
gression, and only after the event does the contest of words between god and man resume in the despairing and rational dialogue of Cadmus and Dionysus in the final scene. The “comedy” of divine vengeance contains a momentary tragic anagnōrisis of hamartia, a movement toward self-knowledge, that is completed only in Agave’s recovery of her civilized identity as wife of Echion and destroyer of her son. The experience has the order and components of a ritual, but only after the event is the priestess of the phōnos said to have performed a thuma. The Dionysiac phōnos seems to become a thuma in part because tragedy, like the sacrificial ritual, controls access to violence, by presenting the slaughter off-stage and interpreted through the pity and fear of a human sympathizer.

In all but one of these four tragedies (the Heracles) the choruses are not, like so many choruses of earlier tragedies, involved citizens. They are outsiders, spectators of the action who provide, through their knowledge and experience of myth and ritual, links to the past and future of the mythical tradition. In the final scenes they may subside into silence and hand their lyric burden to the protagonists, as in the IA and the Phoenissae, where there is a tentative convergence in the plot between ritual and political reality, between iambic discourse and lyric. Or, as in the Bacchae, they remain foreigners, barbaric outsiders to the final tragic lament. Here Euripides’ tragedy emerges from the Dionysiac protodrama simultaneously recognizing its origins in this experience and declaring its separation from it. As Green has said of the Bacchae: “The tragedy combines in itself the ecstasy of the festival, the ordering of ritual and the power of speech. Each of these aspects reveals a different origin, whose mode transcends the particular and constitutes a new form.”

After the sacrifice / agon that destroys Pentheus, the protagonists, though not the chorus, put aside the ecstasy of festival and turn from the god to lament and the consolation and questioning offered by rational speech. The characters become spectators of their own experience who have left festival, if not the memory of it, behind. The tragedy follows the pattern of festival, closing with

69 Green 1979: 182.
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a return to normalcy after a period of inversion. But its return to normalcy, its control of its own violence, is not made without question. In the _IA_ and the _Phoenissae_ we remain uncertain as to the effect of the tragic sacrifice on the “real world” of the drama. In the _Heracles_ we are left with intimations of a possible return of the hero’s madness and his almost unbearable burden of sorrow. In the _Bacchae_ we are left uncertain whether the _polis_ will ever absorb and domesticate Dionysus or control the proliferating and dangerous repercussions of his entry into civilized life; or that we can ever be, like Dionysus, simultaneously actors in and spectators of human existence. Euripides can find no order outside ritual and myth and rational speech, yet in the end the order provided by art, ritual, and speech remains in an uncertain relation to the reality of the contemporary world.