

An Adornment for the God

Re-Centering the Queer Body of Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae*

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(she/her/hers or they/them/theirs)

A young person is coming home for the first time in a very long time; they've been away, traveling, carving out their own identity and finding a new family amongst strangers. They hope that this homecoming will be a positive experience and that they might find acceptance amongst a family who, truth be told, they haven't had much to do with in their life. However, upon arriving back in their hometown, they find that they are much more unwelcome than they had anticipated. Some members of the family are ignoring them completely, others are offering acceptance with conditions. They are not being referred to as they identify and their appearance is spoken of dismissively, even contemptuously by their own kin. The way they dress, the way they wear their hair, the way they see themselves in the world, all of these are spoken of with derision at best and disgust at worst.

At first glance, this might seem to be a strictly 20th and 21st century narrative, a queer homecoming.

But I have just described the primary conflict of a story nearly 2500 years old: Euripides' *Bacchae*. The young person we turn our attention to is not a youth of today, but an ancient and elusive god: Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, madness, theatre and religious ecstasy, a god of opposites and contradictions, gentleness and savagery, ambiguity and confusion. For the purposes of clarity in the face of such confusion, I will use he/him/his pronouns when referring to this deity, but as I will outline those pronouns are, like the rest of the god, far more complicated than first glance.

Bacchae begins with that same Dionysus onstage alone, addressing the audience directly as he outlines his reasons for returning, at long last, to his birthplace of Thebes. The god himself gives a more compact and impactful summary than I could hope to improve upon, so I will allow him to speak for himself in the first lines of the prologue (translation my own):

ἦκω Διὸς παῖς τήνδε Θηβαίων χθόνα/ Διόνυσος, ὃν τίκτει ποθ' ἠ Κάδμου/κόρη
Σεμέλη λοχευθεῖσ' ἀστραπηφόρῳ πυρί:/μορφὴν δ' ἀμείψας ἐκ θεοῦ βροτησίαν

Here I am, Dionysus, child of Zeus, here in the land of Thebes, here where my mother Semele, daughter of Kadmos, gave birth to me in a scorch of lightning. I have changed my form from godhood to a mortal shape.¹

The god goes on to elaborate that he has been traveling all throughout the eastern regions of the classical world, gathering followers and spreading his rites, and has at last returned to Thebes. He and his deceased mother have been slandered by their mutual kin: Semele called a liar and blasphemer, he a fiction. The daughters of Cadmus (Semele's sisters) and the reigning king of Thebes (Pentheus) have deemed Dionysus no true god and Pentheus has taken the extra measure of banning his worship. For the Theban royalty (Cadmus excepted), their erstwhile divine relative does not exist.

The word for 'shape' (*morphe* in the Greek) recurs a few lines later when Dionysus reiterates his transformation:

ᾧν οὐνεκ' εἶδος θνητὸν ἀλλάξας ἔχω/μορφὴν τ' ἐμὴν μετέβαλον εἰς ἀνδρὸς φύσιν

for all this, I have traded my Aspect for a mortal body and changed myself into

human seeming²

¹ *Bacchae*, 1-4, trans. Pauly

Bacchae 53-54

Of utmost importance in these lines is the emphasis on the *newness* of this body and the element of choice: by driving home to his audience that the appearance of the walking, talking, youth they see before them is, in fact, a choice, Dionysus powerfully asserts his identity even as much as he disguises it. The body itself is a mask and, as Dionysus himself knows all too well, masks reveal just as much as they conceal. In Dionysian theology, the mask is a direct confrontation, harkening back to an older tradition of worship wherein a mask was attached to a tree or idol, robed and ivy-crowned; according to Walter F. Otto, “this theophany thrusts Dionysus violently and unavoidably into the here and now- and sweeps him away at the same time into the inexpressible distance. It excites with a nearness which is at the same time a remoteness.”³ In taking a mortal body and walking into Thebes on corporeal feet, Dionysus simultaneously distances himself from and draws himself closer to humanity (and, more importantly, the family he goes to confront). The god has made his appearance extremely public with the arrival of his followers and proclamation of his divinity and yet, paradoxically, chooses to enter Thebes costumed and masked, revealed and hidden.

And what, precisely, has Dionysus chosen to reveal to his audiences with his shape? He refers to his own body sparingly throughout the play, calling attention more to its mortality and artificiality than to its particulars (“ἄνδρὸς φύσιν”, “the seeming of a man”). He uses male pronouns for himself and refers to himself as “*aner*”, “a man”⁴, but Dionysus gives equal textual time to his wardrobe choices: a fawnskin and thyrsus (a fennel-stalk or staff topped with a

² Ibid, 53-54.

³ Otto, Walter F. *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, 91.

⁴ *Bacchae*, 54

pinecone, wound in ivy)⁵, traditional Maenadic accessories. This is in keeping with Dionysus' fashion choices elsewhere in the classical canon; in art across several centuries, he is depicted in clothing usually attributed to women, as well as the *mitra*, a women's headband or fillet. Celebrations in his name often featured ritual cross-dressing, though it can be difficult to determine to what degree⁶. Pentheus himself will be dressed thusly in a few hundred lines, walking willingly and unwittingly to his death.

But this play is not a one-god show, and other characters must bear witness to the Stranger that Dionysus has disguised himself as. Even before Pentheus and Dionysus meet onstage, the King of Thebes takes special note of his effeminacy, calling him “θηλύμορφον”, “woman-shaped”⁷, mentioning his “waves of perfumed hair” and “Aphrodite in his wine-dark eyes”⁸. When they do encounter each other and Dionysus is brought before Pentheus in chains, this laser-focus on Dionysus' appearance is only intensified. The young King of Thebes has the following to say in the face of the Stranger:

Well. Not ugly, certainly. Not to your women, I've heard. Is that why you've come to Thebes, stranger? For the women? Long hair...not a brawler, then. The way it falls over your face, a promise of desire. Smooth skin, carefully maintained. Never worked in the sun, yeah? Kept yourself indoors, behind bedroom doors, doing Aphrodite's dirty work with your looks.⁹

Bacchae is not the only text of the period in which an interaction like this unfolds; in an Aeschylean fragment attributed to the lost play *Edonians*, Dionysus is brought in chains before

⁵ Ibid, 24-25

⁶ Csapo, Eric. *Riding the Phallus for Dionysus: Iconology, Ritual, and Gender-Role De/Construction*.

⁷ *Bacchae*, 353.

⁸ Ibid, 235-236.

⁹ Ibid, 453-459.

another disbelieving king, this time Lycurgus of Thrace. Lycurgus refers to the god as *gunnis*, “womanish” (a pejorative term) and enters into a (now-fragmentary) tirade against the god’s fashion choices: “what partnership can there be between a mirror and a sword?...are you being brought up as a man?”¹⁰. There, the god is described as wearing explicitly feminine clothing, with later scholia attesting to further insults from Lycurgus; a speech attributed to that play related in Aristophanes’ *Women at the Thesmophoria* includes the lines “Then where is your prick? Where’s your cloak...or as a woman, then? Then where are your tits? What do you say? Why are you silent?”.¹¹

Much has been said on the dangers of applying contemporary labels of gender and sexuality to non-contemporary figures; the borders of those realms have fluctuated, broken, and reformed so much over the past two centuries, let alone the past two millennia. Greek notions of gender and sexuality in particular are thorny scholarly ground with respect to real individuals and the task of assigning labels to them is only compounded in difficulty for fictional ones, let alone gods. I make no attempt to do so with Dionysus, but nonetheless assert that the body onstage in Euripides’ *Bacchae* is a queer body. For Pentheus in particular, this queer body is an intrusion into his city, its presentation a choice made for onlookers, a flaunting of the norms that Pentheus cleaves to as a leader.

Nowhere in the text of Euripides’ play does Dionysus refer to himself as seductive, beautiful, enticing, or any other aesthetic modifier of his own appearance. It is other characters, Pentheus chief among them, who project the quality of seduction onto him. The body Pentheus sees is Other, is feminine, is attractive, and therefore that must be intentional, a trap laid for the women of Thebes (and for himself). In Dionysus’ descriptions of his own actions, he does not frame his dissolving of Pentheus’ psyche as a seduction either. Rather, in a

¹⁰ *Edonoi*, fragment 61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

strange moment of distance directly after Pentheus exits into the palace the god exhorts himself to

τεισώμεθ' αὐτόν. πρῶτα δ' ἔκστησον φρενῶν, ἐνεῖς ἐλαφρὰν λύσσαν.¹²

Make him pay. Strip him of sanity, plant a shuddering madness in his heart.

Hardly language of languid seduction. Pentheus himself is fixated on the sexuality of the Maenads and of their leader, of the way *their* bodies make *him* feel, but Dionysus expresses no such intentions. There is a sort of mirror-image of modern queer-coding here; rather than giving a character meant to be interpreted as seductive (or frequently malicious or villainous) queer characteristics, a body that displays queer characteristics is interpreted as inherently sexual both by the characters that encounter it and the real individuals who choose to engage with the text.

Most of the scholarship and discourse around *Bacchae* seems to spiral down into the most dramatic 'set piece' of the play: the robing and rending of Pentheus. As such, there is a gravitational pull into Pentheus' body and psyche, and it is not unreasonable that there would be. Pentheus is male, presents himself as cisgender, and grapples with sexuality and repressed impulse in a way with which many witnessing his pain can find common ground. His death is fearsome and pitiable (as all good Greek deaths are) and his descent into Dionysiac madness perhaps even more so. He is, after all, a tragic protagonist.

But he is not the only one, nor is his body the only body around which the play orbits. *Bacchae* is so often characterized as an unstoppable wave swamping a helpless figure, a removed and inexorable god systematically destroying an enemy that cannot hope to stand in opposition. Dionysus is held at arm's length: a smiling, inscrutable seducer in one line, an

¹² *Bacchae*, 850-851.

incomprehensible force of nature in another. Charles Segal remarks that “throughout the play...Dionysus serves as a screen on which the human characters project their own visions, idealized or distorted, of their own personalities and their world.”¹³ By this line of thinking, the god’s complexity and ambiguity are not his own, but a tool for the other characters in the play to use or misuse. He himself is Other and therefore cannot be understood. He is Other and therefore an audience cannot empathize with him. He is Other and therefore he is not ‘us’. Even within the text, Dionysus’ Theban audience has trouble recognizing his presence (by his own deception). Again, I quote from the Stranger’s interrogation by Pentheus:

D: καὶ νῦν ἄ πάσχω πλησίον παρῶν ὄρᾱ

P: καὶ ποῦ 'στιν; οὐ γὰρ φανερὸς ὄμμασίν γ' ἔμοῖς.

D: παρ' ἔμοί: σὺ δ' ἀσεβῆς αὐτὸς ὦν οὐκ εἰσορᾷς.

D: Even now he is here. He sees what I suffer at your hands.

P: Where is he, then? He’s nowhere my eyes can see.

D: He is with me. You are godless. You cannot see.¹⁴

This tightrope-walk of existence and negation, formlessness and confinement within form, the act of standing in front of another person (particularly a family member) and remaining unseen is a hallmark of the queer experience, especially the non-binary or GNC experience.

Considering the apparent motif of formlessness and changeability, particularly within the confines of gender, the static casting of Dionysus in modern productions seems particularly worth noting. Over the past decade, major productions of the play have chosen, almost overwhelmingly, to embody the god using cisgender male actors. The Almeida production

¹³ Segal, Charles. *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides’ Bacchae*, 89.

¹⁴ *Bacchae*, 500-503.

(with a new translation by Anne Carson) featured Ben Wishaw, while the National Theatre of Scotland saw Alan Cumming lowered onto the stage in a golden kilt, bare hindquarters first. On this side of the Atlantic, Jonathan Groff took up the thyrsus, as did Jason C. Brown for the Classical Theater of Harlem's production this past summer. The only recent major exception to this casting paradigm has come from SITI Company's Summer 2018 production, commissioned by the Getty Villa. There, co-artistic director Ellen Lauren took on the god's mantle, "strutting like an overcaffeinated Mick Jagger"¹⁵, according to the *New York Times*. Even in adaptation, the god has been portrayed nearly exclusively by cis-male actors: Caryl Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds*, *Girls* from Yale Repertory Theater, Charles Mee's *Bacchae 2.0*, even the infamously lurid *Dionysus in '69*. I refer back to Segal here:

Pentheus views the god as a harbinger of dangerous sexual license; Cadmus as an opportunity for the consolidation of political and dynastic prestige; Teiresias as a phenomenon open to regularizing, rationalizing interpretation, and so on. Dionysus is all of these, but also beyond them all. He is...what the beholder wants him to be.¹⁶

So what do we want him to be? If Dionysus is truly gender-ambivalent, why are men the only ones speaking his words? If the body that he has chosen is a queer body, why have theater-makers confined themselves to one type of body when the god would do no such thing? Why are masc bodies or masc-leaning bodies the only ones allowed to play in the non-binary space?

If we apply this projection outside of the world of Thebes, what do we find? What have we projected onto this queer body? Men, for the most part, and a startling combination of

¹⁵ "In This Entertaining 'Bacchae', Dionysus is a Nasty Woman." *New York Times*, Oct 4, 2018.

¹⁶ Segal, 307-308.

oversimplification and othering. In a uniquely Dionysian paradox, the god's power and mystery have been his undoing; he is too inhuman, his presentation too wild, his wrath too terrible.

But what happens when theater-makers put the Other in the driver's seat?

A reading of *Bacchae* which centers itself around the queer body of Dionysus is not only valid in a classical context, but eminently useful. The casting of queer (particularly non-binary, genderqueer or gender non-conforming) actors in the role of Dionysus has the potential to return agency to people who are, for the most part, relegated to bit parts in larger stories, voyeuristic narratives, or erasure. Additionally, Dionysus specifically can address and wrestle with a trend within non-binary representation: inhumanity. There has been a recent upswing in non-binary (or non-binary coded) characters in mainstream media, two recent and well-known examples being Janet from NBC's *The Good Place* and Double Trouble from Netflix's *She-Ra*. The latter is a reptilian shape-shifter, a devious and mostly amoral schemer willing to work for whichever side they deem the winner and their tailed, pointy-eared, mossy green design is a far cry from the (predominantly) humanoid cast of princesses that surround them. Janet, conversely, is eminently human-seeming and uses she/her pronouns, but is constantly reminding the other characters (and the viewer) of her inhumanity ("Not a girl! Not a robot!").

By this reckoning, to be gendered is to be human and a person outside the binary may very well not be a person at all. Masculinity and femininity are two pools of light on a dark stage; to be seen, one must step into one or the other. A person may cross back and forth, but to be in between or outside of is to be in darkness. Dionysus does not refute this trend, but he more than engages with it. Half-human and half-divine, the god is, in this metaphor, half in light and half in shadow.

I am not calling in this paper for a complete overhaul of all future productions of *Bacchae*, nor a condemnation of centuries of decisions that have gone into prior productions. Part of the wonder and beauty of Greek tragedy is just that: every production is a drop in the bucket, one star in a skyful. There will be political *Bacchae*, rock-and-roll *Bacchae*, faith-based *Bacchae*. This is too rich a text to ever say 'this is the only way'.

But this is a way.

Just because *Bacchae* itself depicts a failed integration of a queer body into its family unit (I call it failed because most successful family interactions tend to leave the participants alive and in one piece) does not mean that we have to follow its example; by treating the queer body of Dionysus as a means of reflection only or by holding it at arms length, we distance ourselves from queer individuals who could potentially see themselves in the god or even inhabit his character. Rather than treating the text as a means to put the Other under the microscope, we could allow the Other to examine, celebrate and speak for itself. This need is especially pressing, paradoxically, because of the age of the source material: it is needed now *because* it is ancient, not in spite of it. Queer bodies are so often viewed as a new invention, something that came into the world with television and cell phones. Plays like *Bacchae* can give queer bodies deep roots, can anchor queer stories as far back as there are stories to be anchored in. This is of particular import in the non-binary community, both for audience members looking to see themselves represented and for actors to feel at home in their bodies and in their identities onstage. How beautiful and strange to see a body onstage who simply *is* like them, without adaptation or deliberate reworking? How wonderful not to have to enact 'queering' upon a classic text not because it is incompatible, but because the 'queer' is already vibrantly, patently present?

The first word that Dionysus speaks onstage in *Bacchae* is ἦκω". The simplest form of a simple verb (1st person singular present active indicative). Its meaning is even simpler: "here I am". "I have arrived and I am here", Dionysus says. "Here I am in the body I have chosen. Here I am to be seen by you."

Why don't we let him?

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