

## EURIPIDES' *BACCHAE* IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. *Euripides in Macedonia*

The *Bacchae*, as we know it, was first produced in Athens under the direction of Euripides' son, also called Euripides, in perhaps 405 BC,<sup>2</sup> a year or two after his father's death, but when the tragedian first presented the play he was in Macedonia at the court of Archelaus. So I want to take you on a journey from Athens, north towards Macedon. This means travelling over Cithaeron, and past the site of ancient Thebes; then through the pass at Thermopylae. The fall of Thermopylae to Xerxes in 480 signalled the invasion of Greece by the Persians, and when Philip of Macedon marched towards Thermopylae in 346, the liberty of Greece was threatened. North of Thermopylae the next major barrier was the Vale of Tempe: in 480 the Greeks had thoughts of holding Tempe against the invading army of Xerxes and the Persians, but were forced to make a tactical withdrawal to Thermopylae. Beyond Tempe one passes from Thessaly into Macedonian territory and arrives in the coastal plain of Pieria, about which the Chorus waxes lyrical in *Bacchae* 409-410 ("Pieria the incomparably beautiful") and 565-575. Along the main road north through Pieria, Mt Olympus can be seen to the west, and at about 50 km from Tempe are found the remains of ancient Dion. King Archelaus (413-399) built a temple to Zeus at Dion and a theatre, and we can imagine that Euripides was commissioned to present tragedies here, perhaps even the *Bacchae*, as Seaford (1996:184) suggests.

Euripides had earlier gone to settle in Magnesia.<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of his life he moved, like several other poets (such as the tragedian, Agathon), musicians and artists, to Macedon and the court of king Archelaus, and stayed there until his death in 407/6 at the age of 75.<sup>4</sup> In Macedon he was active as a tragedian, and is even credited with a commissioned production bearing the title *Archelaus*. This probably means that Euripides was used by Archelaus to create through tragedy a myth to strengthen the Argead claim to Greek ancestry: the poor tragedian was to invent an Archelaus, descended from Heracles, who founded Aegae at the command of Apollo (Borza 1990:esp. 172-3). It is thought that Euripides created the *Bacchae* in 407, and it is tempting to think that the first performance of the *Bacchae* was, if not at Dion, then at Vergina, which we take to be the royal capital Aegae.

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1. A version of this paper was presented as part of a series of lectures delivered at Kirstenbosch National Gardens in November 2002 to complement Roy Sargent's excellent open-air production of the *Bacchae*. The aim of this paper is as limited as the title suggests: it is not implied that a political reading of the play should be privileged. I am grateful to the anonymous referee, who materially assisted in improving the presentation of this paper.
  2. Thus Nauck states that it was performed at the end of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Olympiad, in which case 405 (*Euripidis Tragoediae*; ed. A Nauck. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Leipzig 1889) xxvii), but the date seems to depend on the fact that a scholiast refers to the posthumous production in Athens in a note on line 67 of the *Frogs*, which was produced in that year.
  3. *Vita Euripidis* lines 21-2 in the text printed by Nauck (n. 2).
  4. *Vita Euripidis*, quoting Theophrastus; the Parian Marble puts his death in the archonship of Antigones, therefore 407/6.



Figure 1: Map of Greece

For an Athenian to travel to Macedon in the late fifth century was rather like the fashion of British left-wing intellectuals and politicians visiting Russia in the 1920's or early 1950's. This was a vibrant society, breaking loose from its past, with a ruler that welcomed representatives of the intellectual vanguard. Dion was a new cult and cultural centre, where Archelaus inaugurated what Badian (1982:35) styles the counter-Olympics;<sup>5</sup> and Pella was being developed as the new administrative capital for the kingdom.

But for the ordinary Athenian in the *agora* Macedon still represented a backward country, whose barbarous inhabitants spoke a language that was unintelligible to Greeks. In 476 the Macedonian king Alexander Philhellenos had approached the committee at Olympia to be

5. Diodorus Siculus 17,16.3-4, with Arrian *Anabasis* 1,11.1, where Arrian confuses Aegae with Dion: Bosworth 1980:97.

allowed to compete at the Games, and was told that he could not compete as he was not a Greek. After negotiation a concession was made on the grounds that the Macedonian royal house was descended from the Heraclids of Argos (Herodotus 5, 22). Little had changed by c. 400 BC, when the sophist Thrasymachus labelled Archelaus not Greek, but barbarian (Diels-Kranz *Fragmente* 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Frag. 6), and Archelaus was moved to establish his "counter-Olympics". Then again in c. 341 BC Demosthenes could categorise the Macedonians as lower-order barbarians.<sup>6</sup>

Archelaus himself was a problematic individual, as we can see from Plato's *Gorgias*, where Archelaus is taken as a case study in the exchange on the subject whether happiness depends upon goodness. Polos characterises Archelaus as a vicious man, with no legitimate claim to the throne he held: "his mother was a slave of Alcetas . . ., and by rights he too was Alcetas' slave; if he had chosen to follow the path of virtue he would be Alcetas' slave still, and, according to you, happy. But as things are he is inconceivably miserable, because he has committed enormous crimes."<sup>7</sup> So did Euripides begin to worry about his host's ruthlessness and authoritarianism? If so, then there is the possibility that King Pentheus in the *Bacchae* was meant to be seen as uncomfortably like Archelaus.

If there is any truth in the tales about Euripides in Macedonia, which occur in much later sources, one can imagine that they would have reinforced the prejudice of other Greeks against the Macedonians. King Archelaus sought comfort with three pages in particular, and when one of them complained about Euripides' bad breath, Archelaus handed him over to Euripides for a flogging. The page, Decamnichus, was not amused and incited others to assassinate Archelaus (Aristotle *Politics* 1311b 8-35). If Euripides died in 406 and Archelaus was assassinated in 399, we have an improbable gap between the offence to Decamnichus and his revenge.<sup>8</sup> As for Euripides' demise, the wholesome story is that he went into the country and was attacked and torn apart by dogs (Diodorus Siculus 13, 103); the sleazy version is that he was on his way home from a dinner party with Archelaus when a rival for Archelaus' affection set dogs on him (Aulus Gellius 15, 20.9); and there was even a tale that while Euripides was on a nocturnal visit to Archelaus' boyfriend Craterus, he was attacked by women who tore him to pieces (here some creative soul must have been confusing Euripides with Pentheus) (*Suda*, s.v. Euripides).

But to get back to the more serious side of the story: Euripides made a dramatic statement by leaving democratic Athens to settle at the court of a king of a "barbarian" nation. He was well aware of the natural xenophobia of the Athenians, and the Macedonians were very much "the other". But Euripides was, at least in Hammond's view, revitalised by the stimulating environment of Archelaus' court, and Hammond (1979:149) sees this as having a major effect on the shaping of the *Bacchae*: "The gulf between the disillusioned war plays of Euripides and the fervour of his *Bacchae* is explicable only by what Euripides saw and learnt during his stay in Macedonia from 408 . . .". In the *Bacchae*, king Pentheus reacts with disdain to the stranger, whom he fails to recognise as Dionysus, and to his Lydian followers, whom he styles "barbarian women". In all this Euripides was surely reflecting on Athenian

6. Demosthenes 9 (*Third Philippic*).31. Badian (1982) offers a detailed treatment of Greek attitudes to the Macedonians.

7. Plato *Gorgias* 471a-c, translated by W Hamilton (Harmondsworth 1960).

8. And the story is rather close to the tale of Philip, who offended his boy-friend Pausanias perhaps seven years before the latter murdered Philip in the theatre at Vergina.

attitudes to “the other”, and perhaps he appreciated the irony of the possible association of himself with the stranger who brought wisdom and superior knowledge to an alien court.

In the *Bacchae* Cadmus and Teiresias dress up to join the worshippers of Dionysus, but are still recognisable as Cadmus and Teiresias. So too, Euripides may have put on an Archelaus shirt and performed the Archelaus shuffle, but he remained an Athenian intellectual in self-imposed exile, and so we have to consider the play in its Athenian context and we have to examine its Athenian resonances. For a start the play is set in Thebes, the chief city of Boeotia, and for Athenians Thebes was already “the Other”. The dialect of the Boeotians was different from Attic, being closer to Thessalian and the Doric group; and there was a history of rivalry between the Boeotians and the Athenians. The writers of comedy felt free to play on Athenian prejudices against Thebans and Boeotians: Boeotians were over-fed, overly stupid<sup>9</sup> and over the border. But tragedians used Thebes, like Argos and Corinth, in respectively *Oedipus Tyrannos*, the *Oresteia* and the *Medea*, as a means of distancing their material from irrelevant associations with Athenian realities: the plot of a Greek tragedy was set in a different time and in a different place. Thus Thebes in the *Bacchae* stood for “the Other”, but not necessarily in a pejorative sense. Similarly Cithaeron, whatever its mythic connotations, was also “the mountain frontier” separating Athens from Boeotia and Thebes from Corinth.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. *Historical context*

As we saw, Euripides died in 407/6 and the *Bacchae* was produced (at least in Athens) only after his death, apparently in 405. Approval for the production of the play would have been given in the summer of 406. The Peloponnesian war had been dragging on for 25 years, and the military situation was getting progressively worse for the Athenians. They were no longer able to enjoy unchallenged command of the Aegean with their fleet, as the Spartans now had naval forces capable of taking on the Athenian triremes. At the macro-level the balance of political and economic power had shifted in the favour of the Spartans, as the Persians had decided to make sure that the Athenians could not win the war. The immediate crisis in 406 arose first from the Spartan victory in a naval battle at Notium, and then from a naval battle at Arginusae, which the Athenians won, but turned it into a disaster, because the commanders were unable on account of the weather conditions to pick up the survivors. The political fallout from these two battles was that after Notium the career of the charismatic commander, Alcibiades, was over, and secondly that the generals who were at Arginusae were collectively held responsible for the failure to pick up the stranded men. The trial of the generals was constitutionally invalid and undermined such military leadership as Athens still enjoyed. On the Spartan side Lysander took command of the axis fleet and campaigned north as far as Lampsacus on the Hellespont. Across the straits was the Athenian fleet at Aegospotamoi. The Athenian officers refused to take the advice of the experienced Alcibiades, as he had been discredited politically. Lysander duped the Athenians into acting as though he was not going

9. The portrayal of Heracles in the *Frogs* as a boorish glutton has been seen as playing on the association of Heracles with Thebes: Demand 1982:136.

10. Vidal-Naquet 1997:118-9. Thus I agree with Taplin (1999:44) that, despite the Macedonian references no doubt intended for the play’s first audience, “the play’s localization of Kithairon” suggests that Euripides created the text for an Athenian audience. Revermann (2000:461-2) goes much further in playing down the significance of the Macedonian references.

to initiate an action. But he did, and the Athenians lost the battle, and so also the war. That battle would have occurred a few months after the performance of the *Bacchae* in Athens.

But perhaps of more relevance here is the point that from early in Archelaus' reign there was a rapprochement between Athens and Macedon, because it served Athenian strategic interests. In 410 Athens helped Archelaus to seize control of Pydna,<sup>11</sup> and Archelaus obliged by keeping Athens supplied with timber for their ships and oars. Indeed, in perhaps 407/6 BC Archelaus was honoured by the Athenian Assembly with the titles Honorary Consul (*Proxenos*) and Benefactor.<sup>12</sup> So when Euripides was in Macedon, he would not have been there in defiance of anything like an atmosphere of hostility to Macedon, however much Athenians looked down on Macedonians as a lesser breed.

A similar point could be made about the significance of Lydia for the Athenians c. 405 BC. In the *Bacchae* Dionysus has arrived in Thebes from Lydia and he is accompanied by Lydian women. The chief city of Lydia, Sardis, was the capital of the Persian viceroy in Asia Minor. Athenian troops were fighting in Lydia in 409, but either side of that Alcibiades was negotiating with the Persian satrap Tissaphernes (Thucydides 8, 81 sq), and in about 408 Athenians were trying to win Tissaphernes over (Hornblower 1991:149, citing IG i<sup>3</sup> 113). Thus for the Athenian audience of the *Bacchae* Lydia was oriental and "the other", but at the same time a territory for which they had to have a healthy respect.

### 3. *Some historical realities*

In this section I refer to a few historical matters which help to explain some of the allusions in the text of the *Bacchae*.

#### 3.1 Political instability in late fifth century Athens.

Thucydides (2, 65.6-10) notes that the death of Pericles in 429 ushered in a new era in Athenian politics, though in fact the trend can be traced back into the 430's. Thucydides also implies at various points that Athens became vulnerable because political leadership devolved to the young and inexperienced (6, 13.1 and 17.1; cf. 2, 8.1). The traditional model of upper class leadership gave way to a new style of strident demagoguery: Cleon was said to have been the first to take his cloak off to harangue the Assembly (Plutarch *Nicias* 8; cf. Aristotle *Ath.Pol.* 28, 3), and he and the other prominent demagogues were said to be men who owed their wealth to commercial activity: they were the nouveaux riches, lacking in the culture and charm of the old style leaders. But it was not just extremist rhetoric that broke down the consensus in society: clearly the failure of Athenian strategies in the war created or exacerbated divisions. This led to two effective coups d'état, when democracy was set aside and replaced by oligarchy: the first in 411, and the second, more horrendous, coup of 404, which resulted in the liquidation of 1 500 citizens (Isocrates 7, 67; Aeschines 3, 235; Aristotle *Ath.Pol.* 35,4), and the exile of some 5 000 (Isocrates 7, 67).

The political concerns of conservative Athenians are reflected in the *Bacchae*: in at least seven passages Pentheus is described as young and inexperienced (*Bacchae* 274, 330, 974-6, 1185-7, 1226, 1308, 1317-9). It is true that in the Athenian system a male was a *neanias* (or

11. Diodorus Siculus 13,49.1-2; Xenophon *Hellenica* 1,1.12; Hammond and Griffith, 1979:137-8.

12. R Meiggs and D Lewis, *A selection of Greek historical inscriptions* Vol. 1 (Oxford 1969), no. 91; Andocides 2,11.

associated term) from the age of eighteen to the age of thirty, thus youth was relative: nevertheless males up to the age of thirty were considered immature, and ineligible for public office.<sup>13</sup> But Euripides also plays on the ambivalence of the Greek word *neos*, which in one sense means “young”, and in another sense can mean “new” with the connotation of “revolutionary”. Thus Pentheus is “young”, but Pentheus’ view of Dionysus is that he is a new god (256 and 272), one only recently become a god (219), and that Dionysus has driven women to new, or revolutionary, dishonourable behaviour (216). As a responsible king, Pentheus sees it as his duty to challenge this new deity of dubious status, and to stamp out the revolutionary, anarchic behaviour which he inspires.

### 3.2 The introduction of new cults

An Athenian audience would not have had a problem with understanding Pentheus’ assumption that a new cult could not be imported into Thebes without scrutiny. They would also have appreciated Pentheus’ taunt to the stranger that he came to promote a new cult because he planned to make money from it (255-7).<sup>14</sup> Athenians might defer to an oracle on whatever expiatory or propitiatory ritual a god might require, but when it came to admitting a new cult or establishing a new cult centre, the procedure would be for the Council of 500 (the *Boule*) to debate the matter and to formulate a proposal for a decision by the Assembly (*Ekklesia*).<sup>15</sup> Thus what the majority of Athenian adult male citizens deemed right was what would prevail. In the *Bacchae* one might say that Euripides offers almost a burlesque of the Athenian procedure for approving the establishment of new cults, as Pentheus puts the onus on the stranger to his court to prove the existence of Dionysus as a god. Pentheus clearly does not accept the divinity of Dionysus (*Bacchae* 216-220), and is unmoved by the miracles (*Bacchae* 443-772), but his refusal to believe does not stem from atheism, as he is a true believer in the traditional gods of Thebes (*Bacchae* 45-6 and 247) (cf. Yunis 1988:esp. 77-81). Indeed, a level of irony in the *Bacchae* is created by Euripides’ use of the elements of Athenian festivals — *pompe* (procession), *thysia* (sacrifice), and *agon* (contest) - as a framework for the drama, so that, as Kavoulaki (1999:309-312) argues, Pentheus is drawn into the processional rites (the *pompe*) as a *theoros* (an official representative sent to observe and participate in a festival), but his motive for going to observe the rituals makes his participation blasphemous, as an Athenian audience would have appreciated. In the traumatic period of the plague (which began in 430) and disasters in the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians had been persuaded to admit new cults, including the cult of Asclepius and the more exotic cult of the Thracian god Bendis. The admission of new cults was not a trivial matter. Rather later they also established a cult centre for the Egyptian god Ammon. At the private level the cult of Sabazius came to Athens in this same period, Sabazius being associated with Dionysus, and the cult being centred in Phrygia and Lydia.

Aristophanes made fun of this attraction to new cults, especially in the *Birds* and the *Clouds*. In the latter play Socrates, as the Principal of a sort of cram college, advocates

13. Hansen 1999:esp. 88-90. For a definition of *neos* by age see Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1,2.35.

14. Verrall (1910:1-163) even suggested that Dionysus in the tragedy is an impostor, promoting a phoney cult. Oranje (1984:7-19) reviews the broad range of treatments of the *Bacchae*, noting Verrall’s interpretation at p. 8.

15. The evidence on the role of the *Boule* in religion is conveniently assembled by Rhodes (1985:esp. 127-34); Garland 1992:114-5.

recognition of the *Clouds* as the true gods.<sup>16</sup> Aristophanes was a satirist and not a scientific historian, but the mud he threw at Socrates stuck, and in 399/8 Socrates found himself on trial on the mutually exclusive charges of atheism and promoting alien gods. In Plato's account of Socrates' response to the charges (*Apology* 19b-c), Socrates alludes to the damaging and false representation of him in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. The charges of impiety and his uncompromising attitude to the court cost him his life.

Thus for the *Bacchae* it is relevant to note that an Athenian audience would have understood Pentheus' scepticism about the stranger's advocacy of a new or borderline deity, and would have found it perfectly reasonable for him to hesitate about establishing a new cult in his city. And Euripides rather mocks Cadmus and Teiresias for deciding to join the Bacchic dancers just in case. Their motive is not political correctness, since they will be the only Thebans to dance (195-6),<sup>17</sup> but it could be described as religious correctness.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.3 The alien

From 451 Athenian democracy was protected by a very tight definition of citizenship. To retain, or claim, citizenship one had to demonstrate that both parents were citizens (Aristotle *Ath. Pol.* 26,4), and we are told that when the law was introduced some 4 760 Athenians forfeited citizen rights because they failed to satisfy the new requirements (Philochorus, cited by the scholiast on Aristophanes *Wasps* 718). Insofar as citizenship meant having political rights, the change of status may not have been too terrible, but in Athenian law from 451 only full citizens had the right to own fixed property. Thereafter full citizenship was only rarely granted to foreigners, and such a donation required a decision by the Popular Assembly; the grant to a foreigner of entitlement to own fixed property in Attica likewise required a resolution of the Assembly, and was a fairly rare privilege; non-citizens who were allowed to reside in Attica received permission to rent fixed property, but as a rule could never own fixed property, and their status as metics could be revoked. The number of metics living in Attica, mainly in the city and the Peiraeus, was probably always less than 50% of the total number of adult male citizens.<sup>19</sup> Thus the Athenians carefully policed the boundaries of citizenship; the resident alien was very much a second-class inhabitant of the polis; and the loss of citizenship, and therefore also of the right to own property, could be catastrophic. All this serves to explain the force of Cadmus' horror at the end of the *Bacchae* that as an old man he must become an exile and settle as a metic in some barbarian land (1344-5). Athenian attitudes also help to explain Pentheus' reaction to Dionysus and the Lydian women who arrive as strangers in his city.

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16. Socrates appears as a necromancer in the *Birds* (1553 sq.). The *Birds*, produced in 414, includes a scene where Peisthetaerus challenges the goddess Iris, telling her that she is not allowed to pass through Cloudcuckooland, where only birds are gods and not the Olympian deities (1199 - 1266).

17. Oranje (1984:149-150) emphasizes that the isolation of Teiresias and Cadmus offsets the comic element by justifying their fearfulness.

18. Of course one must recognise that Athenians would have made a distinction between joining in the worship of Dionysus, which would have been open to anyone, and submitting to the process of preparation and testing that would have led to initiation into the mysteries of Dionysus. The latter was not for everyone. Cf. Leinieks 1996:123 sq.

19. This is indicated by the only surviving figures, from the census conducted by Demetrius of Phalerum, between 317 and 307: Athenaeus *Deipnosophistae* 272c; cf Hansen 1999:92-3.

### 3.4 Gender issues:

“A ‘feminist’ orientation in Theban religion” seems to have been a reality that would have been known to at least some Athenians (Demand 1982, with quotation from p. 128). It would have been seen by Athenians as another marker of the difference between their two cultures.

This is not the place to get into the debate on male chauvinism in Athens and the position of women in Athenian society. One view is that they were locked away “in almost oriental seclusion”; another that a woman’s freedoms varied often inversely with her status, the high-born lady indeed living in virtual seclusion, but the working woman free enough to go about her business.

The factors that bore upon the treatment of women included the special status given to Athenian women by virtue of the law on citizenship, and the young age at which girls were married off, as girls were married from the age of thirteen, and to men who would normally be approaching thirty. Marriages were arranged and dowries were substantial enough and recoverable, to ensure that the marriages were not lightly dissolved. Thus the new husband was very much *in loco parentis* to his bride, and he was expected to complete his wife’s education.

The age gap between man and wife also helps to explain why Athenian men may have been peculiarly neurotic about their own position and suspicious of their wives. The behaviour of women at funerals was carefully regulated by law, since funerals were an occasion when even the most respectable women might be allowed out and had the opportunity to give vent to their emotions, not to mention the chance to meet other men. Furthermore, as Osborne (1997:187-211, esp. 190 and 208 sq.) argues, orgiastic rites were a reality in classical Athens, and thus the original audience would not have thought of Maenads just as creatures of mythology, but would have associated Maenadism with active religion, and Maenads belonged to the same nightmare world as Amazons for Athenian men.

## 4. *The changing face of Athenian tragedy*

### 4.1 What was new in Euripides’ *Bacchae*?

As tragedy was performed at the festival of Dionysus, it is not surprising that, although Euripides’ *Bacchae* is the only surviving example of a play focused on the myth of Dionysus, Dionysiac myths were more common as the subject of tragedies than Homeric themes (Osborne 1997:192). Aeschylus dealt with Dionysiac themes twice, one of his tragedies being a *Pentheus*, and in 415 Xenocles won the prize for a trilogy that included a *Bacchae*. From the study of vase paintings it is suggested that in previous versions Pentheus went in against the Bacchae with troops, and that Euripides’ novelty was to have Dionysus persuade Pentheus to go dressed as a maenad.<sup>20</sup>

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20. March 1989. But Segal (2000:288) notes that a vase painting from the Villa Giulia in Rome now disposes of the idea that Euripides was the first to present Agave as Pentheus’ killer.



## 4.2 Tragedy and comedy

In the *Bacchae* Euripides seems to test the boundary between tragedy and comedy. Seaford writes that the easiest way to produce the scene between Teiresias and Cadmus is for laughs, and that the mood of the scene should be “festive not comic”.<sup>21</sup> But it is difficult to see how an audience could miss the element of comedy: the recent Cape Town production of the play at Kirstenbosch National Gardens showed that much was gained by not trying to avert laughter. A significant percentage of occurrences of the word laughter in Euripides occur in the *Bacchae*. Teiresias says that Pentheus mocks the myth of Dionysus' birth (lines 286-7); and Dionysus says that the Thebans will laugh when they see Pentheus dressed as a maenad (854-6). So why shouldn't Pentheus laugh at the stranger's claims, and why should the audience not laugh when Pentheus dresses up as a woman? Dionysus was the god of comedy as well as tragedy, and Euripides was capable of playing on this duality. A comic intention is all the more likely if it is accepted that Euripides began experimenting with tragi-comedy at least as early as the *Ion* of 412 BC (Segal 1995:46-55). The *Bacchae* advances the element of comedy in tragedy to a new level, says Taplin.<sup>22</sup>

## 4.3 The *Bacchae* and the Dionysus of Aristophanes' *Frogs*

The *Frogs* was produced at the Lenaia festival of 405, in which case it must have been presented a month or two before the *Bacchae*. The implication is that the scenes in the *Frogs*, where Dionysus dresses up as Heracles and then swaps costumes with his slave, were not created as a spoof for an audience that had already seen the scenes in the *Bacchae* where Dionysus traps Pentheus into dressing up as a maenad and where Dionysus appears in disguise. This is not to say that Aristophanes could not have known what was to happen in Euripides' drama: if it was first produced in Macedon, Aristophanes probably had heard about his *Bacchae*, and may even have been able to read a script of the play long before Euripides' son was invited to present the play in Athens. So in Athens the sequence was comedy followed by tragedy, or farce followed by slasher/horror play.

## 4.4 The end of closure

Dunn (1996:esp. 182) notes that the *Bacchae* differs from the rest of Euripides' plays in the manner in which the play ends. Dionysus progressively casts off his disguises until at the end he emerges as his true, awesome self. (But the same might be said of the *Medeia*, which finishes with Medeia in the chariot of the Sun, a witch-like figure, who has shed her human persona.) In other plays the god appears at the end as a *deus ex machina* to resolve the issue, or to provide an *aition* of some further event or institution. In the view of Dunn (1996:182) the tragedy of Pentheus is upstaged at the end by the final revelation of the true identity of

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21. Commentary on lines 170-369, at p. 167. Gregory (2000:67) goes further in her comment on *Bacchae* 248-252, where Pentheus finds the appearance of Teiresias and Cadmus dressed as worshippers of Dionysus highly comical: Gregory contends that as Pentheus consistently misunderstands the situation throughout the play, “the audience is never inclined to endorse or adopt his point of view”. If the audience was made up of literary critics, “never” might be right, but I would not put money on a popular audience finding nothing comical in the scene.

22. Taplin 1986:esp. 165. Taplin also notes that the Chorus functions in tragedy to direct the emotions of the audience, and would thus prevent the audience turning the tragedy into farce.

Dionysus. Euripides went back to an earlier model of tragedy — “only to destroy it”; Euripides brought tragedy “to a dead end”. Neither Pentheus nor Agave learnt from their tragic experience. But it would be a mistake to give the impression that Euripides brought tragedy to a negative conclusion. Classical literature tended to develop in a dialectic way: with the *Bacchae* Euripides created new possibilities.

### 5. Conclusion

So we have it: the artist towards the end of his working life, operating away from his home town, creating a piece rich in irony and charged with contemporary allusions. There are elements in the play which sit well with the tradition that it was first produced in Macedonia, but at the same time there are many elements in the play which reflect Athenian issues, preoccupations and procedures. Though set in the mythological past it allows recognition of the historical and geopolitical context in which it was conceived. Of course, while these associations may have been obvious to the first audiences and may be significant to the historian, they are not essential to an appreciation of the *Bacchae* as tragedy. In literary terms Euripides appears to test the boundary between tragedy and comedy. Even though in Athens the *Bacchae* was probably only first produced after Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, it seems likely that Aristophanes consciously anticipated what the audience would later see in the tragedy, a form of dramaturgical prolepsis, if Aristophanes had a malicious intent. In any case, Aristophanes has Dionysus turn against Euripides, and in the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides, Aeschylus wins as having greater value for Athens. Perhaps we have come back to the point that, pragmatic politics aside, Athenians did not hold the Macedonians in high esteem: not everyone would have thought that settling in Macedon was the most inspired idea that Euripides had.

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