DOI: 10.14232/suc.2022.3.87-110

ENNO FRIEDRICH

University of Graz

'Green vines on the slag of ruin'? The Choir in Euripides' *Bacchae*

In this paper, I am examining the social role of the choir in Euripides' Bacchae. *I am arguing that Wole Soyinka's adaptation* The Bacchae of Euripides. A Communion Rite *presents a viable model to understand the social relevance of the characterisation of the bacchants in* Bacchae *better. Also Euripides' choir, like Soyinka's slave choir, is affected by the expectation of the role of rural, foreign slaves. The exceptionality and the dramatic conflict of the bacchants lies in the fact that they are free followers of Dionysus while the other protagonists in the play expect them to be slaves. An understanding of the choir along these lines affects the interpretation of the entire* Bacchae: *the play becomes, thus, also a social drama about potential class conflict and class hatred, a problem that Attic tragedy is able to negotiate in the mirror-reality of mythical Thebes.*

Keywords: Euripides, Bacchae, bacchants, slaves, class, Wole Soyinka, Athens, Thebes

1. Introduction

The Bacchae of Euripides. A Communion Rite, Wole Soyinka's 1973 adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae*, begins with this series of impressions:

> To one side, a road dips steeply into lower background, lined by the bodies of crucified slaves mostly in the skeletal stage. The procession that comes later along this road appears to rise almost from the bowels of earth. The tomb of Semele, smoking slightly is to one side, behind the shoulder of this rise. Green vines cling to its charred ruins.[1]

[1] SOYINKA (1973: 1).

In literary studies, we are used to understand literary texts particularly from their first words – *arma virumque cano*. In the case of Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides. A Communion Rite*, this rule can be extended to the first mute scene: the series of impressions, crucified slaves near a road, a procession of slaves that 'appears to rise almost from the bowels of the earth', and finally a patch of green vines attached to the charred ruins of Semele's tomb, represents the series of events that is also otherwise dramatized in the play. The foreign slaves of the city of Thebes are suppressed by their urban masters; with the arrival of the rural god Dionysus, the slaves of the city rise up and take part in the rites of Dionysus; through the enfolding of the events that are told in the Euripidean *Bacchae* – Pentheus' madness, the *sparagmos*, Agave's madness and awakening, the flight of the remaining Cadmeans – the slaves eventually triumph over the shattered city and its former rulers. The 'green vines' on Semele's charred tomb thus, in Soyinka's play, represent the rural, foreign slaves, who eventually outlive the city and its rulers – they are like the re–growing plants that outlive a ruined city.[2]

Focusing on the slaves of the city, one could say, Wole Soyinka in his post–colonial adaptation has turned Euripides' *Bacchae* into a completely different play. The choir of slaves and their highly individualized slave leader are the true subjects of Soyinka's play and the focalizer through whom the audience is invited to perceive the classical drama. In this paper, I would like to argue that Wole Soyinka's highlighting of the choir does not run contrary to the original play but is rather the result of a careful reading of it.[3] Soyinka uncovers aspects that are present in the original but left widely unexplored in modern scholarship: the social role of the choir and the meaning of this role for the significance of Euripides' play as a whole. To make my point, I will first reflect on Soyinka's adaptation as an interpretation of the original (2.). In the following,

---

[2] The 'Green vines' reappear in SOYINKA's play in Dionysus' opening monologue as 'Green vines on the slag of ruin', SOYINKA (1973: 2), from where I took the title for this paper.

[3] The 'Green vines' clinging to Semele's tomb, for instance, are cleverly taken from Dionysus' prologue in the original, Eur. *Bacch.* 11–12: ἀμπέλου δέ νιν / πέριξ ἐγὼ κάλυψα βοτρυώδει χλόῃ. 'And I have shrouded [the sacred place of my mother] all around with the grape bearing greenery of the vine.'

I will look at Euripides' *Bacchae* with a view to the strands of meaning that accompany the social role of the choir, e.g., the opposition of the city and the rural sphere, the description of Dionysus and his following as foreigners and Dionysus' friendly relations with slaves and servants (3). Then, I will finally focus on the social role of the choir in the *Bacchae* as it is expressed in the characterisations by other protagonists (4) and draw my conclusions for the meaning of the entire play from there (5).

2. Soyinka's adaptation as an interpretation of the original

One may ask why it is at all necessary or helpful to take recourse to Soyinka's adaptation if what I am going to show is anyway already in the original play – and it is the original play that this paper is eventually going to be about. It is, if not necessary, at least extremely helpful to do this for the following reasons. As is now a commonplace in literary studies, once developed under the name of reader–response–criticism, the meaning of a text cannot be gleaned from the text alone but comes into being only between a text and its recipients in the act of interpretation.[4] The interpretations that an audience of Euripides' *Bacchae* would make, are not easily available from the remaining text, as they came into being only between the performed version of the text and the (ancient Athenian) audience. If one is, like I am, interested in the interpretations of these implied recipients, one has to be particularly aware that the substance of a text exists only in these.[5] Literary criticism has to overcome itself to an extent to distinguish between interpretations that arise for the inscribed recipients and interpretations that arise out of the social, cultural and structural conditions of scholarship.[6] This is by itself a difficult task and the more so in the case of the *Bacchae* because of the inherently precarious situation of interpreting a text that was never intended to be text but performance.[7] This difficulty would usually tend to rather streamline and fossilize scholarly interpretations, as the raised

[4] See ISER (1994: 50–67).

[5] I would agree with ISER (1994: 34–35), that this is true for all literary texts.

[6] Wolfgang ISER but also others, like Susan SONTAG, took the starting point of their criticism of 'classical interpretation' from this point, ISER (1994: 23).

[7] For the transformation of Euripides' plays into texts that could be read in books, see HOSE (2020); for the transmission of these texts, see PICCIONE (2020).

unavailability of the text's inscribed interpretations tends to raise the appeal of once established interpretations in scholarship.[8]

If this is inevitable, it should appear that breaking up established patterns of interpretation is particularly beneficial in complicated cases like the *Bacchae*. Interpretations are always also influenced by the intersectionality of those who interpret.[9] One way of countering the fossilization of interpretation can be to bring interpretations by as diverse a group of interpreters as possible into the discourse.[10] It is for this reason that I believe adaptations of Euripides' *Bacchae* do not only have an artistic value of their own but also an epistemic value for the interpretation of the original play.[11] This again is particularly the case for Soyinka's work because of the extraordinary mix of abilities and backgrounds that have come together in his career:

Wole Soyinka (*1934) apart from being a playwright is also a politician and an influential intellectual of postcolonial Nigeria since the end of British rule in 1960.[12] Soyinka's position is also special for the fact that he studied literature in Nigeria and Britain at the time before the decolonization but always identified as Nigerian from the time of independence.[13] Soyinka thus had access and was aware of Western scholarship and the Western reception of the *Bacchae*, a fact that is well documented not only by the adaptation itself but also by Soyinka's accompanying essay.[14] On the other hand, Soyinka is a creative practitioner of theatre, as playwright and as director, and his artistic work would position him in the postcolonial tradition of the former British Empire; as Isidore Okpewho puts it, 'he aided the celebration of Nigeria's independence in

[8] ISER (1994: 35).

[9] For a definition of intersectionality, see COLLINS–BILGE (2016: 1-30).

[10] I would agree with Patricia MOYER, who already 25 years ago, in an article about Euripides and SOYINKA, called for a reappraisal of 'the range of personal voices' in scholarship; MOYER (1997: 107).

[11] A thoughtful overview over the vast reception of the *Bacchae* in the 20th century is FUSILLO (2006), see also GOFF (2017).

[12] OKPEWHO (1999: 34–35).

[13] OKPEWHO (1999: 51).

[14] SOYINKA (1973: v–xi).

1960 with the production of his first major play, *A Dance of the Forests*.'[15] Most notably in *The Bacchae of Euripides* but also in his other texts, Soyinka aims to transform the Western canon into a new canon for his postcolonial home country, and demonstrates what Okpewho calls 'the Africanization of Euripides' play' by, e.g., the inclusion of elements from Yoruba culture and the colonial experiences of the suppressed into *The Bacchae of Euripides*.[16] Both Soyinka's practical affiliation with theatre and his pre– and post–colonial British–Nigerian background and interests make him stand out from most Western scholars and might render his interpretation particularly interesting in the sense of presenting a more diverse perspective to complement more or less homogenous Western views. The proof also of this pudding has to lie in the eating, though; I will therefore in the following highlight the interpretative choices in *The Bacchae of Euripides* that are the starting point for my interpretation of the original.

The major change in Soyinka's adaptation is usually seen in the fact that, as his title suggests, he turns the *Bacchae* into a 'communion rite:' the killing of Pentheus at the end of his play clearly serves the liberation of the slaves/bacchants and the renewal of social peace.[17] This change is usually explained in the light of the new traditions of postcolonial literature.[18] It has one major precondition, though: Soyinka looks foremost at the social context of Euripides' original staging and consequently at social constellations in the play.[19] On the level of the play, this results in the focus lying more on the choir and its differentiation into foreign slaves of Thebes and bacchants, who have come from abroad with Dionysus.[20] While the choir of bacchants is limited to their ritual function,

---

[15] OKPEWHO (1999: 34).

[16] OKPEWHO (1999: 32–33; 38–39); the ‚Africanization' of Euripides has not been uncontested; Andrea NOURIYEH sees *The Bacchae of Euripides* more as an adaptation for a London audience than for Nigeria, NOURIYEH (2001: 162).

[17] FISCHER-LICHTE (2014: 58).

[18] For instance BADA (2000: 7-8).

[19] SOYINKA (1973: vi–ix), see also OKPEWHO (1999: 35–37).

[20] This differentiation becomes clear when slaves and bacchants first meet in the play: 'SLAVE LEADER Bacchantes, fellow strangers […] fellow aliens […]' SOYINKA (1973: 15).

the choir of slaves act out a social drama of their own that is given voice mainly by the individual choir leader, the slave leader. The oppression that is thematized in the play is, thus, given from an individual perspective and at the junctions of the play the slave leader works as a focalizer for the audience, who are invited to relate to the plight of the Theban slaves.

The constellation of figures in the original *Bacchae* is clearly different, but the bacchants of Euripides' play are not limited to the role that the bacchants play in Soyinka's adaptation; they include also those aspects that Soyinka extracted and reconfigured in his slave choir. Before I will look at the implications of this in detail, I would like to give a brief overview over the interpretations of Euripides' *Bacchae* in recent scholarship:

Interpretations of the *Bacchae* are legion.[21] Since George Grube's article from the 1930s,[22] the play has mostly been read as a conflict between the rational – Pentheus – and the irrational – Dionysus.[23] Earlier historical–biographical interpretations ascribed this rational – irrational dichotomy in the *Bacchae* – and the fact that Dionysus wins in the end – to Euripides' supposed conversion to a renewed religious feeling in old age. More recent scholarship has emphasized the role of meta–theatre and gender – Pentheus' cross–dressing as a maenad and the ambivalence of Dionysus' and Pentheus' gender.[24] Psychoanalytical approaches stress Pentheus' twisted relationship to seeing the maenads including his mother naked;[25] another focus has been the relationship between the *Bacchae* and religious and cult practice in Athens at the time of the play.[26]

All of these directions in scholarship of the *Bacchae* have in common that they start from the figures of Dionysus and Pentheus and tend to, sometimes implicitly, read either of the two as the key character of the

---

[21] For an overview see REITZAMMER (2017: 298–314), MILLS (2006: 80–102), VERSNEL (1990: 96–99), ORANJE (1984: 7–19).

[22] GRUBE (1935).

[23] Recently SUSANETTI (2016).

[24] FOLEY (1980), ZEITLIN (1990a), BUXTON (2013).

[25] SEGAL (1986: 282–293).

[26] VERSNEL (1990: 99–205).

Bacchae. This leads me to the problem I encountered when reading the *Bacchae* and my personal fascination with Soyinka's adaptation: It is very difficult to imagine the interpretation an Athenian audience would have given to the *Bacchae*, because none of the major protagonists in the play is an inviting focalizer through which to look at the unfolding action.[27] Under these special circumstances, it seems that scholars in the modern West have felt drawn to either the figure of Dionysus or the figure of Pentheus.[28] Laurialan Reitzammer is therefore, in my opinion, well–advised to remind her readers that modern interpreters might be much more sympathetic towards Pentheus, more willing to identify with Pentheus, and more willing to criticize the divinity of Dionysus in the way Pentheus does, than an ancient Athenian audience would have been.[29] This has been shown in extenso by Hans Oranje in his review of the older scholarship.[30]

Wole Soyinka's adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae* does not focus on the figure of Pentheus but on the choir. This creative choice, though, is, as I will show now, based more firmly in the characterization of the choir in Euripides' *Bacchae* than it might appear at a first glance. The original bacchants are addressed as slaves in a number of occasions during the play. I will therefore have a close look at the characterization of the choir and especially those scenes that can be understood as significant for a social placing of the bacchants. If the bacchants were slaves of the city, also in Euripides' original, also interpretations of the whole play would have to include the social conflicts so central to Soyinka's post–colonial adaptation.

The following reappraisal of the choir in Euripides' *Bacchae* has to answer two questions: what is the role of the choir of bacchants in Theban society in the play, and does one have to understand the choir of *Bacchae* as slaves in any way similar to the way Soyinka's adaptation

---

[27] The problem of the interpretation of the *Bacchae* has been fittingly called 'the riddle of the *Bacchae*' by NORWOOD (1908), see also ORANJE (1984: 3).

[28] A particularly poignant example is Arthur VERRALL's interpretation of Dionysus as a fraud, VERRALL (1910: 1–163), see also ORANJE (1984: 7–19).

[29] REITZAMMER (2017: 298–314).

[30] ORANJE (1984: 7–19).

does? These two questions are fundamentally connected with three more general points that therefore also need to be targeted: (1) the opposition between city and rural sphere in the *Bacchae*; (2) Dionysus and the bacchants as foreigners; (3) Dionysus as a friend of slaves in the play. A brief observation of each of these points shall begin my study of the *Bacchae*.

3. Preconditions of the argument

a) The Opposition of the City and the Rural Sphere in the Bacchae

The social placing of the choir of bacchants includes the notion that the bacchants are foreigners and not from the city, as will be shown further below. These attributes of the choir are linked to a general opposition of city and country in the play.[31] This opposition is expressed particularly in the opposed parties of Pentheus and his grandfather Cadmus, on the one hand, and Dionysus, on the other. City and country figure in this opposition in the characterizations of these characters and particularly in some scenes of direct encounter. I will give one example each out of the large number of scenes that characterize each of the parties and that juxtapose city and country when the two parties meet.[32] A natural starting point for the characterizations is the respective introductions of the parties at the beginning of the play.

Bacchae begins with a prologue by Dionysus (1–63) followed by the parodos of the bacchants (64–166).[33] The two parts serve largely to inform the audience about the story of Dionysus in Thebes and to give a characterization of the god; similar information is given by Dionysus himself in the prologue and by the choir in the parodos: Dionysus was

---

[31] Hans ORANJE differentiates between palace, city and Cithaeron, ORANJE (1984: 147–148); the contrast between city (including the palace) and country is far more pronounced than that between city and palace in my opinion.

[32] Further scenes where the contrast is prominent, only some of which can be analysed in detail, are the destruction of Pentheus' palace by the earthquake (Eur. *Bacch.* 586–603), the rage of Cadmus' daughters on the mountain (Eur. *Bacch.* 976–977), the march of the Thebans from city to mountain (Eur. *Bacch.* 1043–1045), Agave's return from mountain to city (Eur. *Bacch.* 1142–1145), spindle and hunt in Agave's discourse (Eur. *Bacch.* 1236–1237).

[33] In my verse count and text, I follow the edition of DIGGLE ed. (1994).

conceived and born in Thebes, where he has now returned in human form (1–12, 88–103); he has travelled the East and established his festivities there (13–22, 120–134); he has now driven his aunts and the other women of Thebes to perform his rites in the vicinity of the city to punish them for slandering his mother Semele and not recognizing his divinity (23–42, 105–119); he is planning to challenge the new king Pentheus, a stubborn non–believer, with his human presence and with his troop of maenads (43–54); the final verses of the prologue introduce the chorus as the god's Lydian following, who shall now announce him in Thebes (55–63); the parodos consequently adds jubilant and exhortative passages to the story of Dionysus (64–87) and culminates in the epode in a picture of the god among his followers on Mount Cithaeron (135–166). This last, conspicuous passage includes a description of Dionysus in a rural setting that strikingly shows the connection between the god and nature:

ἡδὺς ἐν ὄρεσσιν, ὅταν
ἐκ θιάσων δρομαίων
πέσηι πεδόσε, νεβρίδος ἔχων
ἱερὸν ἐνδυτόν, ἀγρεύων
αἷμα τραγοκτόνον, ὠμοφάγον χάριν,
ἱέμενος εἰς ὄρεα Φρύγια, Λύδι᾽,
ὁ δ᾽ ἔξαρχος Βρόμιος,
εὐοῖ.
ῥεῖ δὲ γάλακτι πέδον, ῥεῖ δ᾽ οἴνωι,
ῥεῖ δὲ μελισσᾶν νέκταρι. (Eur. *Bacch.* 135–144)

Sweet in the mountains, whenever (135) out of the running thiasoi he would fall to the ground, being endowed with the sacrifice of a fawn skin, hunting for the blood of slaughtered goats, he ate the prey raw, when he was hurrying to the Phrygian, the Lydian mountains (140), he the leader Bromius, whoopee! The earth flows with milk, it flows with wine, it flows with the nectar of the bees.[34]

[34] Translations are mine.

Dionysus is shown at his own revels running extatically in the mountains. This picture is complemented by a hunt and a scene from the Land of Cockaigne – the god and his following can feast in the mountains with meat, milk, whine and honey being provided by nature.[35] The god, it seems, is at home in the mountains.

Similarly, Cadmus, grandfather to Pentheus, founder of Thebes and head of his family, is introduced with a defining reference to the city. Briefly after Dionysus' depiction in the mountains, the seer Tiresias introduces the former king as:

> Κάδμον […], 170
> Ἀγήνορος παῖδ᾽, ὃς πόλιν Σιδωνίαν
> λιπὼν ἐπύργωσ᾽ ἄστυ Θηβαίων τόδε. (Eur. *Bacch.* 170–172)
>
> […] Cadmus (170), the son of Agenor, who having left the city of Sidon gave towers to this fortress of the Thebaians.

The theme of city building is alluded to three times in this brief passage: Cadmus' Agenorid family hails from Sidon, one of the ancient cities of Phoenicia, a paradigm of the city as such. ἐπύργωσ and ἄστυ refer to city building in its most material form: the fortress at the top of the city and the act of giving towers (and walls) to the city to demarcate its borders. The fact that Cadmus is introduced as Thebes' founder brings his connection to the city and to cities into the foreground.

Cadmus, in this scene, serves to contextualize the more central figure of Pentheus – he is his grandfather and Pentheus is clearly one of Cadmus' stock of city builders. When Pentheus and Dionysus clash for the first time in person in the second epeisodion, Pentheus orders his guards to seize Dionysus with the following explanation: καταφρονεῖ με καὶ Θήβας ὅδε. – 'This one despises me and Thebes' (503). The king and his city are one and the same in their opposition to Dionysus – in the eyes of the Cadmean. As prominent in the characterization of the city dweller Pentheus is his rhetorical rationality. When Cadmus and

[35] For goat slaughter as a Dionysiac practice, see BURKERT (1966: 98–102), SEAFORD (1996: 164–165).

Tiresias, the team of elderly men on their way to honour Dionysus, first meet Pentheus in the first epeisodion, the seer of Thebes has this to say:

> ὅταν λάβηι τις τῶν λόγων ἀνὴρ σοφὸς
> καλὰς ἀφορμάς, οὐ μέγ᾽ ἔργον εὖ λέγειν:
> σὺ δ᾽ εὔτροχον μὲν γλῶσσαν ὡς φρονῶν ἔχεις,
> ἐν τοῖς λόγοισι δ᾽ οὐκ ἔνεισί σοι φρένες.
> θράσει δὲ δυνατὸς καὶ λέγειν οἷός τ᾽ ἀνὴρ 270
> κακὸς πολίτης γίγνεται νοῦν οὐκ ἔχων. (Eur. *Bacch.* 266–271)
>
> Whenever some wise man took a beautiful subject as starting point for his speech, it is no big deal for him to speak well. And you also have a glib tongue like a clever man, but in what you say there is no clever thoughts. One who possesses rashness and masters speaking – such a man (270) becomes a harmful citizen when he has no understanding.

After a praise of sober, straightforward speech that reminds the modern of Cato's *rem tene verba sequentur*, Tiresias criticizes his king as a man who knows how to speak well, but does not have the intellect to fill his speech with valid content. A man like this, he continues, is a danger to society. Tiresias thus criticizes Pentheus in the same way Plato has Socrates criticize the sophists of his, and Euripides', day.[36] The audience, we can assume, is supposed to recognize in Pentheus, or Tiresias' criticism of Pentheus, the criticism brought against city politicians (πολίτης) in 5th century Athens. This becomes apparent again when Cadmus, the city builder, addresses his grandson πολίτης to πολίτης:

> κεἰ μὴ γὰρ ἔστιν ὁ θεὸς οὗτος, ὡς σὺ φήις,
> παρὰ σοὶ λεγέσθω: καὶ καταψεύδου καλῶς
> ὡς ἔστι, Σεμέλη θ᾽ ἵνα δοκῆι θεὸν τεκεῖν, 335
> ἡμῖν τε τιμὴ παντὶ τῶι γένει προσῆι. (Eur. *Bacch.* 333–336)
>
> And even if this guy is not the god, like you say, he shall be said to be at your court; and you shall beautifully lie that he is such, so that

[36] This must have been particularly funny to a 5th century audience, because Euripides has Tiresias continue in a typical long sophist's speech with warped arguments about all sorts of things (Eur. *Bacch.* 266–327). See SEAFORD (1996: 174).

> Semele may seem to have given birth to a god (335) and glory be added to us, to the entire tribe.

Cadmus puts Tiresias' criticism of Pentheus' type into live action, when, assuming that Pentheus does not care for the truth but only for his personal benefit and the benefit of his group, he suggests to his grandson to ignore what he thinks is right and support the story of Dionysus' divinity for the sake of the additional glory this would shower on the Cadmeans. Cadmus, like Tiresias before, characterizes Pentheus as a rhetorical thinker after the model of the Greek sophists of the fifth century and the new class of only self–interested politicians that was particularly prominent at the turn from the 5th to the 4th century.[37] Rhetorical thinking is, thus, an attribute that is closely related to the spirit of the city–dweller that is also otherwise shown in the characterization of Cadmus and Pentheus.

The characterizations of Dionysus as a rural god and Pentheus or the Cadmeans as city–dwellers becomes particularly distinct whenever the two are contrasted with each other. In the action of the play the two figures and the spheres they represent clash, when Dionysus destroys Pentheus' palace (576–603) or predicts his death by the hands of Agave (973–976). This opposition is also present in the poignancy of the contrast in describing words whenever the two spheres touch. In the fourth stasimon when the choir prepares the killing of Pentheus they ask:

> Τίς ὅδ᾽ ὀρειδρόμων μαστὴρ Καδμειᾶν 385
> ἐς ὄρος ἐς ὄρος ἔμολ᾽ ἔμολεν, ὦ βάκχαι; (Eur. *Bacch.* 385–386)

> Who is this seeker for the Cadmean ladies, who runs in the hills (385)
> to the mountain to the mountain, o bacchants?

Here the word Καδμειᾶν marks the daughters of Cadmus, Agave and her sisters, the maenads, as originally belonging to the sphere of the city, the one pole of the twisted story; Pentheus, the king of the city, to the contrary, is marked twice as now belonging to the sphere of the holy

[37] For a recent survey of the relationship of rhetoric, democracy, individuality and the polis in this time, see ALEXIOU (2020: 1–25).

mountain of Dionysus (ὀρειδρόμων; ἐς ὄρος ἐς ὄρος). The liturgical–sounding repetition (ἐς ὄρος ἐς ὄρος) affirms this swap of roles with Pentheus walking the path of a maenad himself now. The two poles – Cadmean city and Dionysiac mountain – are positioned against each other in poignant brevity.

This same phenomenon can be observed in a number of passages. At the beginning of the herald's report that tells the death of Pentheus, the journey of the troop is told:

> ἐπεὶ θεράπνας τῆσδε Θηβαίας χθονὸς
> λιπόντες ἐξέβημεν Ἀσωποῦ ῥοάς,
> λέπας Κιθαιρώνειον εἰσεβάλλομεν 1045
> […]. (Eur. *Bacch.* 1043–1045)

> After we had stepped out of the living quarters of the Theban land, having left behind the floods of Asopus, we entered the mountainous area of Cithaeron (1045) […].

Also here the human, everyday quality of the 'Theban land' with its 'living quarters' (θεράπνας) is contrasted with the uninhabitable 'mountaineous area of Cithaeron', reflecting the major opposition of the play. In the same report, Agave and her sisters, who are Theban city girls by heritage and position but act as maenads of Dionysus in the play, are described in quick succession first as 'daughters of Cadmus' (Κάδμου κόραι, 1089) and then as 'not inferior in swiftness to a wild rock–pigeon' (πελείας ὠκύτητ᾽ οὐχ ἥσσονες, 1090) showing the contrast of their urban family belongings and their wild actions. Similarly, after Agave's return, she, still half mad, describes herself braggingly:

> […]
> ἣ τὰς παρ᾽ ἱστοῖς ἐκλιποῦσα κερκίδας 1236
> ἐς μείζον᾽ ἥκω, θῆρας ἀγρεύειν χεροῖν. (Eur. *Bacch.* 1236–1237)

> […me] who, having left behind the weaver's shuttles with the looms, comes to something better: catching animals in the hunt with my hands.

The textile labor of city–dwelling women is opposed to the feats of the maenads in the mountains, in this case with a premonition that the wild side will win.

The three kinds of examples I have given show clearly that Dionysus and the Cadmeans are opposed to each other along the lines of the wild countryside and the civilized city. But as especially the third kind of examples can show, this opposition runs through the entire play as prominently that it guides various single descriptions into the same dichotomy. The opposition of city and country is therefore one major line of meaning in Euripides' *Bacchae*.

b) Dionysus and the Bacchants as foreigners

Another such line of meaning is the idea that Dionysus, who is originally from Thebes, and the choir of bacchants are a foreign element in the city if not in Greece in general.[38] This idea is uttered both by the god and his following in a neutral or positive self–description and by the Cadmeans and their Theban compatriots in disdain. I will now briefly list some passages that can represent the important aspects of these descriptions.

The introduction of Dionysus in the prologue includes a catalogue of the places he has been to: Lydia, Phrygia, Persia, Bactria, Media, Arabia – in short, all of Asia already knows the god (13–17). While he has already established his rites in all these places 'with Greeks and Barbarians mixed together' (μιγάσιν Ἕλλησι βαρβάροις, 18), Thebes shall be the first city in Greece proper to receive his cult (23–25). What is true of the god is also true of his following. At the end of the prologue Dionysus addresses his bacchants like this:

> ἀλλ᾽, ὦ λιποῦσαι Τμῶλον ἔρυμα Λυδίας,
> θίασος ἐμός, γυναῖκες, ἃς ἐκ βαρβάρων
> ἐκόμισα παρέδρους καὶ ξυνεμπόρους ἐμοί,
> αἴρεσθε τἀπιχώρι᾽ ἐν πόλει Φρυγῶν
> τύμπανα, Ῥέας τε μητρὸς ἐμά θ᾽ εὑρήματα,
> βασίλειά τ᾽ ἀμφὶ δώματ᾽ ἐλθοῦσαι τάδε 60
> κτυπεῖτε Πενθέως, ὡς ὁρᾷ Κάδμου πόλις. (Eur. *Bacch.* 55–61)

[38] See also ORANJE (1984: 146).

> Onwards, you who have left Tmolus, the fence of Lydia, my festive procession, women, whom I have led from the Barbarians as my companions in the festival and my fellows in travel, take up the kettle-drums that are at home in the cities of the Phrygians, the invention of Mother Rea and of me, and after having marched around this kingly palace (60) here of Pentheus, make noise, so that the city of Cadmus may hear.

Also the bacchants, we learn, come from Asia (Λυδίας) and bring Asian customs with them (Φρυγῶν). It is worth mentioning that the contrast between Greek and foreign in this passage is combined with the contrast of city and country. Not only do the bacchants hail from Lydia but from the mountains of Tmolus, which are described as 'fence of Lydia' to underscore their mountainous harshness. The foreign bacchants shall bring their message to the city of Cadmus (Κάδμου πόλις) which is given Pentheus' kingly palace as an urban attribute (βασίλειά […] δώματ[α] […] Πενθέως). The dichotomy of city and country and the dichotomy of Greek and foreign are thus merged together. The choir affirms this double dichotomy only a few verses later in their own song when they say to have brought Dionysus 'from the Phrygian mountains to the spacious roads of Greece' (Φρυγίων ἐξ ὀρέων Ἑλλάδος εἰς εὐρυχόρους ἀγυιάς, 86–87). Again, Phrygian mountains' mark the rural–foreign, 'spacious roads' the Greek–urban.

The foreign–native dichotomy is taken up by the choir in the second stasimon. Here, the question of receiving the foreigners is posed to Dirce, a nymph representing Thebes, who had received Dionysus in the mythical past but now, as city of Thebes, is unwilling to receive the choir of bacchants (519–536).[39] This passage is important because it transforms the merely mythological foreignness of Dionysus and his flock – the fact that the cult of Dionysus is somehow culturally understood to be 'Asian' rather than Greek – into a current social issue: Will Thebes accept the foreign bacchants into their community? We will see later that this transformation from mythological into social is recurring in the play.[40]

---

[39] See SEAFORD (1996: 191–192) for the ritual context of this scene.

[40] SEAFORD (1996: 192) notes for this scene that ‚in the *Ba*[*cchae*] [the tragic chorus participates in the action] more than elsewhere in Eur[ipides].'

After these different aspects of foreignness have been shown, it remains to point to the great number of passages where Dionysus is called a foreigner by Pentheus, which I will represent with three examples, Eur. *Bacch.* 460; 642; 800:

πρῶτον μὲν οὖν μοι λέξον ὅστις εἶ γένος. 460
First of all, tell me what's your origin.

πέπονθα δεινά: διαπέφευγέ μ᾽ ὁ ξένος, 642
Terrible misery! The stranger has escaped me!

ἀπόρῳ γε τῷδε συμπεπλέγμεθα ξένῳ, 800
I am stuck with this annoying stranger

Pentheus, the representant of the city, constantly reminds the god, his following and the audience of Dionysus' status as a foreigner. His part is the official refusal to allow Dionysus, his cult and his following entrance into the society of Thebes.

Both Dionysus and the Bacchants are styled as foreigners by the Thebans. While the bacchants also ascribe foreignness to themselves, the ascription of foreignness especially by Pentheus is always negative. The repulsion of the foreigners by the people of the city lays the foundation for part of the conflict that is thematized in the play.

c) Dionysus, friend of slaves

The third preliminary point marks the fact that Dionysus is recurringly depicted as a friend of the servants of Pentheus. This fact is important as it locates Dionysus, his cult and his following socially in Thebes – with the servant class.

When the servants of Pentheus bring the arrested god in the second epeisodion, they retell their encounter and do not forget to also give the friendly exchange between the prey and its hunters. They did not capture the god out of their own free will:

Ὦ ξέν᾽, οὐχ ἑκὼν 441
ἄγω σε, … (Eur. *Bacch.* 441–442)

> Stranger, I do not persecute you out of my own free will, …

In the third epeisodion, the messenger advises Pentheus to honour Dionysus because of the miracles he has seen on mount Cithaeron:

> ὥστ᾽, εἰ παρῆσθα, τὸν θεὸν τὸν νῦν ψέγεις 712
> εὐχαῖσιν ἂν μετῆλθες εἰσιδὼν τάδε. (Eur. *Bacch.* 712–713)

> So that, if you had been there, you would approach the god, whom now you censure, with prayers seeing these wonders.

Both of these extracts show that Pentheus' slaves take a positive picture from Dionysus and counsel Pentheus in his favour. This behaviour is particularly remarkable as it diametrically opposes the stance of the irate king, and is, if one looks at the scenes with a realistic expectation, a high risk for the servants. That they still stick to the foreigner, characterizes the friendly relationship between the two as authentic while it undermines the credibility of the king's accusations against the god.

To conclude the preliminary points, it can be said that the opposition of city and countryside is one recurring line of meaning in the *Bacchae.* In this opposition, the Cadmeans take the side of the city and Dionysus and his following the side of nature and the countryside. In alignment with this opposition is a second opposition, the one of foreign and Greek.[41] Also in this opposition, Dionysus and his following take the space of the foreigners. Lastly, it can be said that Dionysus stands in a special relationship to the servants, slaves and the imprisoned of the community. He is a friend of the slaves. I can now resume my original endeavour, return to the choir of bacchants and try to answer the two questions formulated before: what is the role of the choir of bacchants in Theban society in the play, and does one have to understand the choir of *Bacchae* as slaves in any way similar to the way Soyinka's adaptation does?

4. The Bacchants as foreign rural servants in Euripides *Bacchae*

A social placing of the bacchants in the society of Thebes is not self–evident as the bacchants of the myth of Dionysus ordinarily would not

[41] Compare ORANJE (1984: 146–148).

have any social role in any society; they are a prop of the myth, the following of Dionysus, and much like satyrs or amazons do not actually belong into any social reality. Social reality, at least at some level of interpretation, I argue, plays into Euripides' tragedy also where the mythological context would forbid it. The bacchants in Euripides are also foreign rural servants in a social setting in the same sense that Euripides' Medea, apart from being a mythological figure, is also a married woman in a realistic social setting.[42] That this level of meaning is present also in the *Bacchae* can be shown by the following passages.

The best place to show this is the encounter of the bacchants and the messenger in the fifth epeisodion (1024–1042), which I am giving in three extracts:

> ὦ δῶμ᾽ ὃ πρίν ποτ᾽ εὐτύχεις ἀν᾽ Ἑλλάδα,
> Σιδωνίου γέροντος, ὃς τὸ γηγενὲς
> δράκοντος ἔσπειρ᾽ Ὄφεος ἐν γαίᾳ θέρος,
> ὥς σε στενάζω, δοῦλος ὢν μέν, ἀλλ᾽ ὅμως
> χρηστοῖσι δούλοις συμφορὰ τὰ δεσποτῶν. (Eur. *Bacch.* 1024–1028)
>
> O House of Greece, before then happy, of the old man from Sidon, who sowed the earthborn harvest (1025) in the lands of the Snake, how deeply do I sigh about you, even if only a slave, but for good slaves the misery of their masters is nonetheless a shared experience.

The passage is particularly well endowed with the lines of social meaning I sketched above. The messenger gives an address of three verses to the city of Thebes, reiterating the circumstances of its foundation. This he juxtaposes to himself, a slave. With this social self–placement and the resulting opposition of the masters and the slave, the scene is set for the following dialog between the messenger and the bacchants.

---

[42] That the specificity of Euripides' treatment of Medea is the tension between the social realism of a story about an abandoned woman in a Greek polis and the mythic tale of a male–heroic outsider figure, has been stated more or less expressly by many authors, for a few recent ones see FOLEY (2000), MUELLER (2017), SWIFT (2017), SILVA (2019).

τί δ᾽ ἔστιν; ἐκ βακχῶν τι μηνύεις νέον;
Πενθεὺς ὄλωλεν, παῖς Ἐχίονος πατρός. 1030
ὦναξ Βρόμιε, θεὸς φαίνηι μέγας. (Eur. *Bacch.* 1029–1031)

Bacchants: What's up? From the bacchants, what news can you report?
Messenger: Pentheus is dead, the son of his father Echion. (1030)
Bacchants: Lord Bromius, your greatness as a god is disclosed!

The choir asks for news from Mount Cithaeron; the messenger proclaims that Pentheus has been destroyed; the choir rejoices with an address to their god Dionysus under the guise of Bromius. A social encounter follows.

πῶς φήις; τί τοῦτ᾽ ἔλεξας; ἦ ’πὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς 1032
χαίρεις κακῶς πράσσουσι δεσπόταις, γύναι; (Eur. *Bacch.* 1032–1033)

Messenger: How can you say this? What have you just said? Do you seriously rejoice over my masters, who are in bad shape, woman?

The messenger reacts with astonishment. He would have expected that the bacchants like him are slaves of Pentheus and like him, would share in the misfortune of his master – like he had just said above: 'for good slaves the misery of their masters is a shared experience' (1028).

The choir answers to this with a statement that again is a social placing of themselves, Eur. *Bacch.* 1034–1035:

εὐάζω ξένα μέλεσι βαρβάροις:
οὐκέτι γὰρ δεσμῶν ὑπὸ φόβωι πτήσσω. 1035

I jubilate strange things with my foreign song:
Because not anymore I am struck with fear from chains. (1035)

They do not share in the *symphora* of the slave because they are foreigners, who with Pentheus' demise are now free of the threat of imprisonment – a threat that had been real for these bacchants earlier in the play.

The statement that they are foreigners and therefore not loyally bound to Pentheus is affirmed by the bacchants when they refer to their

master Dionysus. The messenger–slave accepts this statement although he still takes the behaviour of the bacchants to be at least insensitive to the circumstances.

The interest of this passage lies in the expectation that the messenger seems to bring to the bacchants that they, like him, are slaves of Pentheus. The bacchants decline this, saying that they are foreigners and followers of a foreign god. The roles of foreigner and slave, though, are far from exclusive in most societies, in ancient Athens and in what an Athenian expectation of mythical Thebes would have been. The remarkable thing for the messenger is that these foreign women assert to be foreigners but deny to be slaves. The most interesting point about this scene for my purpose is that the realistic expectation of the messenger is that people like the bacchants would usually be slaves and should behave accordingly. The bacchants are exceptional because they do not.

The next passage reaffirms that the realistic role of the bacchants in the Theban society the audience might have imagined would be that of slaves. When Pentheus incarcerates Dionysus at the end of the second epeisodion, he also announces that he will have the bacchants sold as slaves or brought back from the kettle drums to the weavers' looms of the house – the realistic occupation of city women:

> ἐκεῖ χόρευε: τάσδε δ᾽ ἅς ἄγων πάρει 511
> κακῶν συνεργοὺς ἢ διεμπολήσομεν
> ἢ χεῖρα δούπου τοῦδε καὶ βύρσης κτύπου
> παύσας, ἐφ᾽ ἱστοῖς δμωίδας κεκτήσομαι. (Eur. *Bacch.* 511–514)
>
> There you may dance! And those to whom you are a leader as helpers in bad deeds, either we will sell them, or, after I have stopped their hand from this thud and from the banging of the drum, I will make them fit as slave girls at the looms!

The passage again shows that the bacchants are exceptional because they do not do, what they would do in a realistic setting.

A third passage renews this expectation. When, in the exodus, Agave, still not quite herself, brags of the gruesome slaughter of, unknowingly, her son on Mount Cithaeron, the bacchants direct her to address her speech to the citizens of Thebes. In this constellation the bacchants

take the role of supporting women in the household of Agave – most likely slaves – a role they do not actually have, but at least Agave in her delusion takes them to be:

> δεῖξόν νυν, ὦ τάλαινα, σὴν νικηφόρον 1200
> ἀστοῖσιν ἄγραν ἣν φέρουσ᾽ ἐλήλυθας. (Eur. *Bacch.* 1200–1201)
>
> Now show, miserable woman, to the citizens your glorious bounty (1200) that you have gone out to bring back!

This scene is important for the social constellation of the play also in a wider sense that can help the understanding of the play along the lines of my questions. As I remarked earlier, a fitting focalizer for an Athenian audience in the *Bacchae* is conspicuously absent: in all of the play one meets the Cadmeans and their slaves and servants, but one does not meet the class of people that form the backbone of polis society: citizens.[43] Only in the scene between Agave and the choir we find a clear ascription of citizens. After being ordered to show her bounty to the citizens of Thebes, Agave gives a triumphal speech to the audience, who is, thus, indirectly declared to be, what they also are in real life: the citizens of the polis. In as much as Agave's fury is the ultimate sign and reason for the Cadmeans to be expelled from their position of power, the audience, the citizens of the polis, are invited to judge this themselves from Agave's deluded monolog. The facilitators of this determining situation within the play are the bacchants.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, one can summarize the question of the choir as follows: Do the bacchants also have a social role in a realistic imagination of mythical Thebes? This has to be answered in the affirmative. The bacchants are mythical figures but they are also characterized as people who would

[43] This is not entirely true. As I have shown above, Cadmus and Tiresias are given the typical attributes of city–dwellers including rhetorical speech, which make them appear like *polites* – in breach of their mythological roles; Tiresias is indeed a figure that is offered as a focalizer for the audience in the beginning, but he does not appear anymore after verse 369. For a recent interpretation of Tiresias in the whole play, see SEIDENSTICKER (2016).

realistically be slaves if it wasn't for Dionysus. This social role of the bacchants in mythical Thebes puts them in a social struggle and has an impact on the entire play. Hans Oranje discusses the special quality of the choir in *Bacchae* and notes their 'involvement in the scene which is being played, and in the actions of, and actions against, the character with whom they are linked.' This function, like Oranje continues, 'exceeds that of a „Programmlied" or even of a „Szenenreflex"' in the sense of Rode.[44] But while Oranje, based on his observations, shies back from 'class[ing] the bacchants as a character in the play' and sees their function still as 'interpret[ing] moods,'[45] I would go beyond this because of the social function of the bacchants inscribed in the text. It is of course true that the bacchants give supporting volume to the words of Dionysus, but what is called the 'drama of liberation' by Oranje[46] is the drama of the bacchants more than that of the god. As much as Dionysus is a god in the play, there is never any doubt that he will receive what is his right. The situation of the bacchants is much more precarious – they would be slaves – and therefore interesting for the tragedy. More than setting the 'mood', it is the fear, the rage and the triumph of the bacchants – the urgency of their struggle – that carries the audience through the tragedy and gives coherency to the otherwise fragmented play.

Looking back at Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides. A Communion Rite* the significance of the social role of the bacchants/slaves is thus similar but also different in the two plays. While in Soyinka's version the audience is invited to identify with the slave leader and his group, *Bacchae* leaves the audience in the position of the otherwise missing *polis*–citizens. Even with the social function of the bacchants in mythical Thebes which I have tried to show, the social struggle of the rural foreign servants remains savely stored away in the twisted mirror–reality of Thebes as an Anti–Athens that Froma Zeitlin has described.[47] Nonetheless, the steady tension around the roles of slaves and bacchants adds to the dramatic power of the play. The Theban picture of an unbounded

[44] ORANJE (1984: 157).
[45] ORANJE (1984: 158–159).
[46] ORANJE (1984: 158).
[47] ZEITLIN (1990b).

social struggle carries the numerous appearances of the choir through the play, and gives an urgency to Euripides *Bacchae* that would be impossible if the bacchants were simply mythological props in a play about Dionysus and Pentheus.

Primary sources

DIGGLE 1994 — J. DIGGLE (ed.): *Euripidis fabulae*. Oxford 1994.

SOYINKA 1973 — W. SOYINKA: *The Bacchae of Euripides. A Communion Rite*. New York 1973.

Secondary sources

ALEXIOU 2020 — E. ALEXIOU: *Greek rhetoric of 4th century BC: the elixir of democracy and individuality*. Berlin; Boston 2020.

BADA 2000 — V. BADA: *Cross–Cultural Dialogues with Greek Classics: Walcott's "The Odyssey" and Soyinka's"The Bacchae of Euripides."* ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature 31, 3 (2000) 7–28.

BURKERT 1966 — W. BURKERT: *Greek tragedy and sacrificial ritual*. GRBS 8 (1966) 87–121.

BUXTON 2013 — R. BUXTON: *The boundary between male and female in « Bacchae »: the importance of discrimination*. In M. A. Guggisberg (ed.): Grenzen in Ritual und Kult der Antike: internationales Kolloquium, Basel, 5.–6. November 2009. Basel 2013, 35–45.

COLLINS-BILGE 2016 — P. H. COLLINS – S. BILGE: *Intersectionality*. Cambridge 2016.

FISCHER-LICHTE 2014 — E. FISCHER-LICHTE: *Dionysus Resurrected. Performances of Euripides' The Bacchae in a Globalizing World*. Chichester 2014.

FOLEY 1980 — H. P. FOLEY: *The masque of Dionysus*. TAPA 110 (1980) 107–133.

FOLEY 2000 — H.P. FOLEY: *The Comic Body in Greek Art and Drama*. In B. Cohen (ed.): Not the Classical Ideal: Athens and the Construction of the Other in Greek Art. Leiden 2000, 275–311.

FUSILLO 2006 — M. FUSILLO: *Il dio ibrido. Dioniso e le "Baccanti" nel Novecento*. Bologna 2006.

GOFF 2017 — B. GOFF: *All aboard the Bacchae Bus*. In: L. McClure (ed.): A Companion to Euripides. Chichester 2017, 565–582.

GRUBE 1935 — G. M. A. GRUBE: *Dionysus in the Bacchae*. TAPA (1935) 37–54.

HOSE 2020 — M. HOSE: *Die euripideische Tragödie auf der Bühne der Antike*. In M. Schramm (ed.): Euripides–Rezeption in Kaiserzeit und Spätantike. Berlin; Boston (Mass.) 2020, 13–42. 10.1515/9783110677072–003

MILLS 2006 — S. MILLS: *Euripides, « Bacchae »*. London 2006.

MOYER 1997 — P. MOYER: *Getting personal about Euripides*. In J. P. Hallett – T. Van Nortwick (eds.): Compromising traditions: the personal voice in classical scholarship. London; New York 1997, 102–119.

MUELLER 2017 M. MUELLER: *Gender*. In L. McClure (ed.): A Companion to Euripides. Chichester 2017, 500–514.

NORWOOD 1908 G. NORWOOD: *The Riddle of the Bacchae*. Manchester 1908.

NOURYEH 2001 A. NOURYEH: *Soyinka's Euripides: Postcolonial Resistance or Avant–Garde Adaptation?* Research in African Literatures. 32, 4 (2001) 160–171. https://doi.org/10.1353/ral.2001.0106

ORANJE 1984 H. ORANJE: *Euripides' Bacchae. The play and its audience*. Leiden 1984.

OKPEWHO 1999 I. OKPEWHO: *Soyinka, Euripides, and the Anxiety of Empire*. Research in African Literatures, 30, 4 (1999) 32–55. https://doi.org/10.1353/ral.2005.0046

PICCIONE 2020 R. M. PICCIONE: *Von der Bühne in die Bücher: zur Dynamik der Euripides–Überlieferung*. In M. Schramm, (ed.): Euripides–Rezeption in Kaiserzeit und Spätantike. Berlin; Boston (Mass.) 2020, 43–62. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110677072–004

REITZAMMER 2017 L. REITZAMMER: *Bacchae*. In L. McClure (ed.): A Companion to Euripides. Chichester 2017, 298–311.

SEIDENSTICKER 2016 B. SEIDENSTICKER: *The figure of Teiresias in Euripides' « Bacchae »*. In P. Kyriakou – A. Rengakos (eds.): Wisdom and folly in Euripides. Berlin; Boston (Mass.) 2016, 275–283.

SEAFORD 1996 R. SEAFORD: *Bacchae. With an Introduction, Translation and Commentary*. Warminster 1996.

SEGAL 1986 C. SEGAL: *Interpreting Greek tragedy. Myth, poetry, text*. Ithaca (N.Y.) 1986.

SILVA 2019 M. SILVA: *Maternidade e filicídio*. Cadmo 28 (2019) 11–30.

SUSANETTI 2016 D. SUSANETTI: *The « Bacchae »: manipulation and destruction*. In P. Kyriakou – A. Rengakos (eds.): Wisdom and folly in Euripides. Berlin; Boston (Mass.) 2016, 285–298.

SWIFT 2017 L. SWIFT: *Medea*. In: L. McClure (ed.): A Companion to Euripides. Chichester 2017, 80–92.

VERRALL 1910 A. VERRALL: *The Bacchants of Euripides and other Essays*. Cambridge 1910.

VERSNEL 1990 H. L. VERSNEL: *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman religion, I: Ter Unus : Isis, Dionysos, Hermes : three studies in henotheism*. Leiden 1990.

ZEITLIN 1990a F. I. ZEITLIN: *Playing the other : theater, theatricality, and the feminine in Greek drama*. In J. J. Winkler – F. I. Zeitlin (eds.): Nothing to do with Dionysos?: Athenian drama in its social context. Princeton 1990, 63–96.

ZEITLIN 1990b F. I. ZEITLIN: *Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama*, in J. J. Winkler – F. I. Zeitlin (eds.): Nothing to do with Dionysos?: Athenian drama in its social context. Princeton 1990, 130–167.