

Perspectives on the Impact of *Bacchae* at its Original Performance

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Although Dionysus was already worshipped by the Greeks in Mycenaean times, his cult was believed to be an import from barbarian lands, and *Bacchae* enacts an ancient myth narrating its problematic arrival at the mainland Greek city of Thebes. The story is one of several mythical illustrations of an archaic Greek imperative: those who doubt the power of the gods must be disabused of their disbelief. The royal house of Thebes must be punished because it questions the divine paternity of Dionysus, its most illustrious offspring. Yet *Bacchae* is more than an exemplum of divine prerogative expressed through the consecutive motifs of resistance, punishment and acceptance. Not only is Dionysus the protagonist: his drama is a study of his own elusive personality and of his devastating power.

Bacchae expresses Dionysus' function as god of altered consciousness and illusion. In an unforgettable encounter, Dionysus, disguised as a mortal, puts the finishing touches to the Bacchanal disguise of Pentheus, his mortal cousin and adversary, before leading him to the mountains to be dismembered by the women of the city he is supposed to rule. Pentheus is in a Dionysiac trance; he can no longer distinguish between reality and illusion; he has assumed the identity of someone other than himself. The spectator is invited to contemplate the experience of any performance which entails the impersonation of one being by another. Drama demands that performer and spectator collude in a suspension of the empirically 'real' world. Pentheus dresses in a maenad's attire, just as each chorus member had done before actuality was forsaken and the drama began; in the original production this also required assuming the identity of the opposite sex, for all the performers would have been male. *Bacchae*, therefore, is a meditation on the very experience of theatre – a mimetic enactment of the journey into and out of illusion, the journey over which Dionysus presides in the mysterious fictive worlds he conjures up in his theatre.

The Greek mind was trained to think in polarities; to categorize, distinguish and oppose. If the personality of Dionysus can be reduced to one principle, it is his demonstration that conventional logic is inadequate for apprehending the universe as a whole. Dionysus confounds reason, defies categorization, dissolves polarities and inverts hierarchies. A youthful god and yet an immortal, respected by the elderly Cadmus and Teiresias, he cannot be defined as young. He is male and yet in his perceived effeminacy and special relationship with women cannot be defined as conventionally masculine. Conceived in Thebes yet worshipped abroad, he is neither wholly Greek nor barbarian. He conflates the tragic and comic views of life, as the patron deity of both genres. His worship can bring both transcendental serenity and repulsive violence: the slaughter of Pentheus, followed by his mother's invitation to the bacchantes to share in the feast, entails three crimes considered abominable by the ancient Greeks: human sacrifice, infanticide and cannibalism.¹ Dionysus may be worshipped illicitly on the wild hillsides of Thebes, but he is also the recipient in Euripides' Athens of a respectable cult at the heart of the city-state. So he cannot be defined as the representative of nature in opposition to civilization. In using delusion to reveal the truth he confounds conventional distinctions between fiction and fact, madness and sanity, falsehood and reality. In *Bacchae* Dionysus causes the imprisoned to be liberated, the 'rational' to become demented, humans to behave like animals, men to dress as women, women to act like men, and an earthquake physically to force the untamed natural world into the 'safe', controlled, interior world of the household and the city.

Until the climax, when the deluded Agave appears, Thebes is represented exclusively by males; the beliefs of the dangerous culture which the disguised Dionysus threatens to introduce have been articulated by women. But with Agave's gradual return to 'normal' consciousness, even this binary, gendered opposition is exploded. This Theban woman once doubted the existence of the god, but comes to know as she emerges from her Dionysiac mania that in the severed head of her son she bears the physical proof that Dionysus is a living reality in Thebes. The revealed truth is that the denied god, the outsider, the alien, has belonged inside all along.

The transhistorical appeal of *Bacchae* is partly due to its insusceptibility to any unitary interpretation. Its portrayal of the unrestrained emotionalism which can lead human crowds into inhuman conduct spoke loudly to scholars at the time of the rise of fascism;² its portrayal of the conflict within Pentheus' psyche has also fascinated psychoanalytical critics.³ But ultimately it frustrates all attempts to impose a monolithic 'meaning'. It neither endorses nor repudiates the cult whose arrival in Thebes it narrates. It never did prescribe for its audience a cognitive programme by which to understand an

inexplicable universe. It simply enacts one occasion on which the denial, repression and exclusion of difference – psychological, ethnic and religious – led to utter catastrophe.

Bacchae remained familiar throughout antiquity, a constant in the performance repertoire and in the visual arts and a favourite of the emperor Nero (Dio Cassius 51.20). It provided a familiar theme in pantomime, the wildly popular form of musical theatre which took tragic mythological narratives to every corner of the ancient Roman Empire.⁴ In pantomime, pleasure was generated by the transformation of the dancer into different roles within the individual story: if he were dancing a pantomime version of the story told in Euripides' *Bacchae*, he would successively assume the mask and persona of Dionysus, Teiresias, Cadmus, a messenger and the delirious Agave (*Greek Anthology* 16.289). The musical sections of *Bacchae* were also performed at drinking parties. When Plutarch reports the death of Crassus (*Vit. Crass.* 33.2–4), the head of the slaughtered Roman general was brought into the presence of the Parthian king Orodes when a tragic actor, Jason of Tralles, was performing 'the part of Euripides' *Bacchae* which is about Agave'. Jason handed his 'Pentheus' costume to one of the chorus, and seized Crassus' head. Assuming the role of the frenzied Agave, and using Crassus' head as 'a grisly prop',⁵ he sang from her lyrical interchange with the chorus, 'We bear from the mountain a newly cut tendril to the palace, a blessed spoil from the hunt' (1169–71). This delighted everyone. But when the dialogue was sung where the chorus asks, 'Who killed him?', and Agave responds, 'mine was this privilege' (1179), the actual murderer sprang up and grabbed Crassus' head, feeling that these words were more appropriate for him to utter than for Jason.⁶ By the second century BC the role of the god Dionysus in *Bacchae* could even be realized as a solo aria by the star cithara-singer Satyrus of Samos.⁷

In contrast, the modern admiration for *Bacchae* is a relatively recent development. Despite the widely read and illustrated retelling of Pentheus' death at the end of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book 3, no Renaissance performances, Early Modern adaptations or eighteenth-century neoclassical plays took Pentheus as their theme. No performances of *Bacchae* featured during the first two decades of the revival of staged ancient Greek tragedy which began in around 1880.⁸ The reasons for the neglect – or avoidance – of the play were ethical and religious. Although some Byzantine scholars heard Christian reverberations in the story of ritual dismemberment and divine epiphany, *Bacchae* did not sit well with the Christian sensibility of the Renaissance and Early Modern era. One devout eighteenth-century critic could hardly contain his revulsion, warning his readers that 'the refined delicacy of modern manners will justly revolt against this inhuman spectacle

of dramattick barbarity.⁹ But an upsurge of interest in Dionysus and the connections between ancient Greek ritual and myth developed at the end of the nineteenth century, with the wide dissemination of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1872) and Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890).¹⁰ The interest in ritualism drew scholars magnetically to this extraordinary play, and it is now considered one of Euripides' supreme masterpieces. But in this essay I return to the very beginnings of the play's performance history at the end of the fifth century BC. I explore how reading *Bacchae* as the culmination of the group of plays with which it was first performed can illuminate the meanings – aesthetic, ethical and theological – which it engendered in its original performance.

Bacchae was first performed as part of a tragic tetralogy, that is, a group of three tragedies followed by a satyr play. The two Euripidean tragedies which preceded it in the group were the surviving *Iphigenia in Aulis* and the lost *Alcmaeon in Corinth*; we sadly cannot identify the name of the satyr play. Like both *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Bacchae*, plays about Alcmaeon were well known in the ancient repertoire. Aristotle paid them an indirect compliment in his *Poetics* by naming Alcmaeon alongside the more familiar Orestes and Oedipus when specifying ideal tragic heroes (Ch. 13). After Euripides' death, tragedies about Alcmaeon were written both by the fourth-century Astydamas and by the Roman Republican playwright Ennius. Alcmaeon was a prominent figure on the ancient tragic stage with numerous complicated adventures before the action portrayed in *Alcmaeon in Corinth*, including those portrayed in Euripides' earlier play about him, *Alcmaeon in Psophis*. He was Argive, son of Amphiaras, a prophet and king. Alcmaeon led the second generation who besieged Thebes, the 'Epigoni'; like Orestes, he killed his mother (Eriphyle) in order to avenge his father, was maddened by the Erinyes, then purified. But in *Alcmaeon in Corinth*, Alcmaeon is in middle age. He arrives in Corinth to find the two children he had fathered long ago, during his matricidal insanity.

The outline of the plot of *Alcmaeon in Corinth* must be reflected in a Greek mythological handbook, written in the first or second centuries AD under the Roman Empire, Apollodorus' *Library* (3.7.7). Earlier in his career, after the second siege of Thebes, Alcmaeon had a sexual relationship with Teiresias' daughter Manto. They had two children, a boy named Amphilocheus and a daughter named Tisiphone. Alcmaeon had left Amphilocheus and Tisiphone in Corinth for his friend Creon, the king, to raise. But Creon's wife had sold Tisiphone, a great beauty, into slavery, fearing that Creon might become enamoured of her. In Euripides' play, Alcmaeon came to Corinth, and was reunited with both his children, but only after a near-miss incestuous encounter with Tisiphone. He had not seen her for years, and purchased her as a slave before they recognized one another. His son Amphilocheus

subsequently founded Amphilochian Argos. There is a slight suggestion in the fragmentary remains that the tone of the play may have been intermittently amusing, as was so often the case in Euripides' 'happy ending' plays; this was certainly the tone adopted by Colin Teevan in his bravura new play on the theme, incorporating the remains of both of Euripides' plays about Alcmaeon as well as some of his unplaced fragments, in English translations which I provided for him. It was first produced under the title *Cock o' the North* at the Live Theatre, Newcastle upon Tyne, directed by Martin Wylde, in 2004.¹¹

There is no obvious circumstantial link between the action dramatized in the three tragedies, except possibly in the figure of Teiresias, Alcmaeon's Theban father-in-law, who appears in *Bacchae* and may have done so in *Alcmaeon in Corinth*. Although we only have fragmentary knowledge of *Alcmaeon in Corinth*, we do know enough to understand the variety of settings which the spectator of the whole tetralogy enjoyed. They were taken, in their collective imagination, sequentially to a military tent near the wave-churned beach at Aulis, a sumptuous residence on or near the Corinthian acropolis overlooking the sparkling waters of the Corinthian Gulf, and to the ancient palace of the Theban monarchy in the dusty plains of Boeotia under the towering Cithaeron mountain range. The group of tragedies constituting Euripides' last full-scale production at the Athenian Great Dionysia thus took their spectators on a tour of three contrasting sites in central Greece that were also central to the Greeks' inherited mythology.

The plays also took the spectator on a voyage through mythical time, but in reverse chronological order. The Trojan War took place in the lifetime of Polynices' son Thersander (see Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 2.33–45), who in some early versions of the Troy story, by the time of the Greek expedition, had succeeded to the throne of Thebes and so led the Boeotian contingent.¹² The Greek expedition to Troy which prompts the action of *Iphigenia in Aulis* was understood as happening a considerable time *after* Thersander had besieged Thebes with the 'Epigoni', the sons of the 'Seven against Thebes'. The action of the second play in the group, the Corinthian adventure of Alcmaeon, the leader of the Epigoni, would have been understood by theatre audiences as preceding the Trojan War and therefore the incident at Aulis. But the third play, *Bacchae*, took the viewer far further back into mythical time, to a tragic incident involving the first three generations of Thebans – the founder Cadmus, his daughter Agave and his grandsons Dionysus and Pentheus. Pentheus was king of Thebes at least three generations prior to Jocasta, Creon and Laius, and at least five generations before the Trojan War. The audience of this group of plays witnessed an early stage in the Greeks' account of the evolution of their city-state civilization. The back-story is the birth of Dionysus, and so the audience relive nothing less than the very dawn of the

religion they practised and the rites of the wine-god whose festival they were celebrating in the form of drama competitions in fifth-century democratic Athens. Very few tragedies, however, are set in mythical time so early that the cult of Dionysus has not yet been accepted in every major Greek city-state. Besides the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound*, the action of which takes places many generations before the birth even of Heracles, no other extant Greek tragedy takes its viewer so far back in time.

All the myths dramatized in tragedy of course presuppose a world long before tragic theatre has been invented. In tragedy, songs are sung by bards and known from works of visual art: there are no plays within plays to be seen in Euripides' *Aulis*, *Corinth*, or *Thebes*.¹³ There is some sophisticated 'metatheatre' – reflection on the nature of tragic mimesis – in *Bacchae*, but it is implicit rather than involving explicit references to the experience specifically of theatre.¹⁴ There may have been strong inter-performative resonances, however, since all three plays had famous precursors and the meanings created by certain scenes may have been augmented or inflected by echoes of earlier plays. *Iphigenia in Aulis* demonstrably draws on Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and the various depictions of Clytemnestra in subsequent tragedies, including the *Electras* of both Euripides and Sophocles; Aeschylus had also written an *Iphigenia*. The characterization of Achilles must also be informed by Aeschylus' famous Trojan War trilogy, the *Achilleis*.¹⁵ In the case of *Alcmaeon in Corinth*, stories about Alcmaeon, derived from the lost epic *Alcmaeonis*, had long been a mainstay in the tragedians' repertoire. We have already noted that Euripides had himself produced a play about Alcmaeon's earlier experiences, his *Alcmaeon in Psophis*, one of the group (also including *Telephus*, *Cretan Women* and *Alcestis*) with which he won second prize in 438 BC. Sophocles had also been interested in Alcmaeon: the title of his lost plays include not only an *Epigoni* but an *Eriphyle* and an *Alcmaeon* which seems to have treated the theme of Alcmaeon's madness.¹⁶ Two other fifth-century playwrights, Agathon and Achaeus, also wrote plays about Alcmaeon. *Bacchae* also had important precursors, notably Aeschylus' famous trilogy about the rejection of Dionysus by Lycurgus, king of Thrace, his *Lycurgeia*.

The centrality of Dionysus to *Bacchae* makes it appropriate that we owe what little we know of the circumstances in which this unforgettable play was originally produced to a remark by the god Dionysus in the only other surviving ancient drama of which he is protagonist, Aristophanes' *Frogs*. In line 67 of that comedy, the god Dionysus says that he is overwhelmed by a desire for the tragedian Euripides; Dionysus' interlocutor Heracles completes the line by adding that Euripides is dead. It was a single comment inscribed beside this line by an ancient scholar on a copy of the text which has preserved our priceless information that, after the death of Euripides, his son, under the

same name, produced at the City Dionysia the following plays: *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Alcmaeon in Corinth* and *Bacchae*.

This information allows us to date the premiere of *Bacchae* with some likelihood to 405 BC,¹⁷ the same year in which Dionysus starred in the premiere of *Frogs*, a year when the Athenian democracy stood on the very brink of catastrophe. The *Frogs* scholiast implies that Euripides' son produced the group containing *Bacchae* relatively soon after his father's death, which makes a date later than 405 improbable. We know from the *Life of Euripides* that Sophocles appeared in black robes of mourning at the 'Proagōn' (on which event see further below) to the performances of tragedies in 406, when his rival Euripides had died. Sophocles, himself elderly, reduced the people to tears, with the heads of his troupe bare of the customary festive garlands. At a pinch, the plays could therefore have been produced in 406, if Euripides had already planned to produce these three plays and his son had been able to step into his shoes and the death caused no disruption at all. But the 405 date does seem most likely. For the purposes of this essay, however, it does not matter whether it was 406 or 405, since the historical and political context, about which much has been written, is less my concern here than the way in which the particular place taken by the performance of *Bacchae* in that particular group might have affected its nature as a performed experience, and its aesthetic, ethical and metaphysical impact.

The existence of the group of plays, as cited by the scholiast on *Frogs*, raises important questions about the way that tragic poets composed their plays, and planned their production in the drama competition. The scarcity of our evidence on key aspects of the festival administration has led scholars to make large assumptions and then treat their speculations as if they were articles of faith. The one certainty about these three plays is that they were produced posthumously and by Euripides' son. But we do not know whether he was acting on instructions from his father, or even according to a plan for a group which had been discussed within the family. It is perfectly possible that amongst Euripides' papers were unperformed plays, and that his son decided to propose these three (plus a satyr play of which we do not know the name) to the archon (magistrate) for posthumous performance.

Thinking about this process must make us focus on two uncomfortable facts. (1) Although we know when these three plays were first performed, we have no idea when they were first written. There is no reason why Euripides could not work on a particular play on and off for years, or write one mid-career which, for whatever reason, was not produced in his lifetime. (2) Although there is no reason to doubt that the three plays were performed in the order cited by the Aristophanes scholiast, we have no evidence that Euripides himself either wrote them with a joint production in that order in

mind, or decided at some point, when looking for a set of three tragedies to put together in a single programme, that they would work satisfactorily in this particular arrangement. Such a decision might have been taken by his son, or it might have been virtually unavoidable if these three were the only, or the best tragedies left behind by his father at his death. But again, for our purposes it does not necessarily matter whether the group was originally conceived (or even at a later point developed) as a unified theatrical experience; what we *can* think about is how the decision to run these three plays together sequentially affected the meanings that they did in fact create in performance.

But the experience of performance began well before the drama competitions proper. The spectator at the Dionysia on that spring day not long before Athens lost the Peloponnesian War will have gone to the theatre excited at the prospect of seeing some hitherto unperformed works of the recently deceased tragedian. Euripides' popularity is emphatically stated in *Frogs*, definitely produced before these plays at the Lenaea of 405. It was the theme of several other comedies of the era: a character in one lost comedy announced that he would be prepared to hang himself for the sake of seeing this (dead) tragedian, and in another named *Euripides-Lover* a character discussed people who hate all lyrics but those by Euripides.¹⁸

How much did the spectators know about the productions before the great day arrived? The plays were submitted for the archon's consideration by a date between a year and a few months or so before the next festival. Each tragedian had to propose a tetralogy to be performed on a single day of the festival. For the 458 BC festival, for example, Aeschylus submitted his tetralogy the *Oresteia*, consisting of *Agamemnon*, *Libation-Bearers*, *Eumenides* and a satyr drama called *Proteus*. We know nothing of how much actual text he was required to submit, and little about the means by which the archon – probably in consultation with other officials – decided which three tragedians were to compete. It is likely that a poet whose production in a previous competition had proved disastrous could be excluded, and we hear of complaints when Sophocles, as a favourite poet, was not selected.¹⁹ The three selected tragedians were at this time allocated their principal actors, their chorus, and also their *chorēgos*. This was a wealthy man who sponsored the production by funding the maintenance, costuming and training of the chorus of citizens made available to each competing tragedian.

After months of rehearsal, the drama competitions at the City Dionysia were inaugurated at the Proagōn, which means the formality 'preliminary to the competition' or 'before the competition.' After about 440 BC this was held in a roofed building called the 'Song Hall' (Odeon) next to the theatre. All the dramatists who were about to compete ascended a rostrum, along with their

actors and chorusmen (wearing neither masks nor costumes), and ‘announced’ or ‘talked about’ their compositions.²⁰ It would be fascinating to know more about the Proagōn, especially the degree to which the details of the plot and special effects were made public, and how far the actual masked performances at the festival assumed knowledge of the personnel that had been gained when they appeared without their masks. How surprised were the audience by the twists and turns of the plots in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Alcmaeon in Corinth* and *Bacchae* when they were actually performed in full?

We know rather more about the ceremonies which took place on the festival day following the Proagōn, and their nature may have affected considerably the frame of reference within which the spectators understood the plays. From the perspective of *Bacchae*, the plot must have seemed related to, or even in some sense a continuation of, the religious rituals earlier in the festival, to which the physical effigy of Dionysus was central. The rites began with the procession called the ‘Introduction’ (Eisagōgē), which annually reproduced the introduction of Dionysus to his theatre in the city sanctuary. According to myth, this commemorated his original journey from Eleutherae (on the border with Boeotia, the region around Thebes) into Attica.²¹ Instead of recreating the entire journey, the icon of Dionysus – a wooden pole with a mask at one end – was adorned with a costume and ivy. It was carried from his city sanctuary to an olive-grove outside the city called the Academy, on the road that headed out towards Eleutherae. A day or two later, after hymns and sacrifices, Dionysus was brought by torchlight in a great procession back to the theatre in his sanctuary from which he had been taken.²²

Once Dionysus had been installed, the festival opened officially the next morning with the Pompē, or ‘procession’. All the city was now in a state of high excitement: the Assembly could not be held, nor legal proceedings initiated, and it seems that even prisoners could be released temporarily on bail (which may have added extra meanings to Dionysus’ escape from captivity after the earthquake in *Bacchae*).²³ The procession, which probably led from the city walls, would stop at each of several shrines on its way to the sanctuary of Dionysus in order to sing and dance for different gods, just as the chorus of *Bacchae* sings its ritual hymns in mythical Thebes. But the procession, at the same time, symbolically defined the relationships between the social groups that made up Athenian society. It was led by a virginal young woman from an aristocratic family (perhaps memories of her were prompted during the tragic performances by Euripides’ *Iphigenia* and by Alcmaeon’s daughter). She carried the ceremonial golden basket for the choicest pieces of meat from the sacrifice which will have ‘set the stage’ for the sacrifice theme in both *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Bacchae*. The *chorēgoi* who had funded the productions wore expensive costumes, sometimes made of gold.

Provision had to be made for the public feast, and the many thousands of people attending the festival would have needed a great deal to eat: the bull specially chosen to be the principal sacrificial animal, as 'worthy of the god', which must have been recalled by the bull imagery in *Bacchae*, was accompanied by younger citizens in military training (*ephebes*). There were, in addition, hundreds of lesser sacrifices; the sanctuary of Dionysus must have resembled a massive sunlit abattoir attached to a barbecue. It resounded with the bellowing and bleating of frightened animals, was awash with their blood, and smelled powerfully of carcasses and roasting meat. The sight of the dismembered carcasses will have provided its own reverberations to the audience who heard about the maenads' activities in *Bacchae*.

The theatre itself was prepared for the culmination of the festival, the performance of the plays, by ceremonial activities. These began with a purification rite that may have involved yet another sacrifice, this time of very young piglets. The military atmosphere of *Iphigenia in Aulis* will have recalled the civic rituals which took place at this point. The ten *stratēgoi* ('generals'), the most senior elected officers of state, poured out libations of wine to the gods. A public herald made a series of announcements, naming recent benefactors of the city. When the theatre was full, there was a display of rows of golden money bars ('talents'), the revenue Athens had accrued that year from the states allied with her, who in practice were her imperial subjects and thus required to pay tribute. The imperial flavour was heightened by the public presentation of a suit of armour to all those sons of Athenian war dead who had achieved military age, before they were invited to take prominent seats near the front of the theatre.²⁴

The production's three actors and their chorus were allocated months before the festival. The chorusmen were required to impersonate excitable women local to Aulis in *Iphigenia in Aulis* and female and male ritual followers of Dionysus in *Bacchae* and the closing satyr drama respectively. We do not know their identity in *Alcmaeon in Corinth*. It is also possible for us to reconstruct, at least in the case of *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Bacchae*, exactly how the individual roles would have been assigned. In *Iphigenia in Aulis*, one actor played Agamemnon and Achilles, one Menelaus and Clytemnestra, and one the Old Man, Iphigenia and the Messenger. In *Bacchae*, one actor played Dionysus and Teiresias (god and prophet), another Pentheus and Agave (young man and his mother) and the third Cadmus and the two messengers. Since we know that some actors specialized in certain types of role – strong male heroes or young women, for example – we can speculate about which parts were taken by the same actor across all three plays. It is highly likely that the Agamemnon/Achilles actor played Dionysus/Teiresias; it is the most

plausible guess that he also played Alcmaeon – a famous warrior in midlife – in the second play.

The continuity between the roles taken by the individual actors, who will not have been able to disguise their voices altogether, must have affected the impact of the performances. The actor who played both Agamemnon and Alcmaeon had intense scenes with two young daughters, although Agamemnon's daughter passes from happiness to misery, and Alcmaeon's, apparently, from misery to happiness. The actor who played both Dionysus and Teiresias in *Bacchae* will have had the opportunity to play a true priest and a god disguised as a priest; the Pentheus/Agave actor may have used his voice to reinforce the poignant familial relationship between these two characters. The changing between male and female identities of the second and third actors in *Iphigenia in Aulis* will have set up the issue of gendered transvestism explored so poignantly in the scene where Pentheus dresses up as a maenad in *Bacchae* in order to infiltrate the revels. It is likely that the same actor who specialized in impersonating old men and delivering messenger speeches played the elderly, morally refined slave in *Iphigenia in Aulis* and the kindly, ageing Cadmus in *Bacchae*. The whole group of tragic plays thus began and ended with scenes involving old men played by this actor, who was responsible for creating much of the pathos and ethical effect.

The issue of cognitive confusion certainly ran through the tragedies. Iphigenia and her mother need to be disabused of the delusion that they are in Aulis for a wedding: Clytemnestra's embarrassing first encounter in *Iphigenia in Aulis* with Achilles, who she thinks is about to become her son-in-law, gains its power from her misapprehension. There must have been a painful scene either enacted or narrated in *Alcmaeon in Corinth*, where the father and daughter did not realize that they were blood relations. And in *Bacchae*, of course, failure to apprehend reality accurately, epitomized in Pentheus' failure to recognize Dionysus physically, a concrete reiteration of the denial of Dionysus' godhead by Semele's sisters which had stimulated the action of the tragedy in the first place, is a major structuring motif: it culminates in Agave's deranged appearance with the head of her son, which she falsely believes, instead, to be the head of a lion.

The fundamental question asked by epistemology – how do we know what we know? – seems to have underpinned the plays' metaphysical signification. Like all effective tragedies (and we can assume all three were effective because they were victorious in the competition), they took their audience on a metaphysical journey through different ways of thinking about the reasons why humans suffer. *Alcmaeon in Corinth*, on the basis of our evidence, seems to have been a play where *eros* was important; perhaps the real-world importance of the cult of Aphrodite at Corinth figured large in a

play about a beautiful maiden and the men – whether Creon and/or her unwitting father – who may have been attracted towards her. But this is speculation: the crucial role in changing the situation of the principal characters was apparently chance or coincidence. This was the force the Greeks called *tuchē*, which became more important to Euripides over the course of his life's work, is especially visible in *Ion* and was to become crucial to the plots of New Comedy. But the plays performed before and after *Alcmaeon in Corinth* were much darker: human error and premeditated divine malice are the driving force of the plots. In both, the movement of the plot is downhill towards doom. Yet the first and third plays stand at opposite ends of the spectrum of Euripidean metaphysics. The will of the gods is at its most obscure and unknowable in *Iphigenia in Aulis*; it is at its most starkly revealed in *Bacchae*. Human life is wrecked in both cases, but the possibility of evading the catastrophe seems to me to be far greater in *Iphigenia in Aulis*. From what little we know of the central play, catastrophe seems actually to have been avoided altogether.

Euripides did not write the whole text of *Iphigenia in Aulis* as it stands. There is a question mark over the authenticity of Agamemnon's 'delayed' prologue, positioned after the opening dialogue; there are several spurious passages scattered throughout the play, probably interpolated by actors after the fifth century. But by far the most significant interpolation begins with the appearance of the second messenger, or at least at that part of his speech which reports the disappearance of Iphigenia, whisked away by Artemis, and the substitution of a deer. This comforting alternative ending to the tragedy – perhaps inserted during the fourth-century crystallization of the tragic performance canon by an ancient theatrical company familiar with the hugely popular *Iphigenia in Tauris*²⁵ – radically affects both its theological meaning and its emotional impact. Modern directors often prefer, quite legitimately, to conclude performances with Iphigenia's unrelievedly tragic walk to her death at line 1531, the version I believe was originally performed in 405 BC.

In 1957 the insightful scholar Karl Reinhardt published an influential article 'Die Sinneskreise bei Euripides' or 'The Crisis of Meaning in Euripides'. This article was responding to the Existential tradition in literature, which Reinhardt traced explicitly through Kafka and Sartre, and which reveals the profound influence of Samuel Beckett's dramatic universe, the universe of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'.²⁶ For Reinhardt, *Iphigenia in Aulis* teeters on the brink of 'the sheerest absurdity'. Reinhardt's Euripides is less a poet of direct protest than a nihilist, an existentialist practitioner of the theatre of the absurd, dedicated to revealing the hollowness of the intellectual and linguistic strategies by which humans struggle to comprehend their situation. Some of

the most powerful moments in *Iphigenia in Aulis* come when the characters on stage, unable to extricate themselves from absurd situations, resort to transparently hollow justifications, 'spinning' an argument, or attempting to make sense of their circumstances by conspicuously employing (in ancient terminology) the science of rhetoric.²⁷

The role of spin/rhetoric within *Iphigenia in Aulis* is underscored by the manner in which almost everyone changes his or her mind, under rhetorical pressure, about the issue of the sacrifice. Euripides was fascinated by the factors which condition moral choices, and some of his tragedies explored the dangers attendant upon precipitate decision-making. In 406, the Athenians had precipitately executed no fewer than six of their generals, after an unconstitutional trial, as punishment for the great loss of life at the Battle of Arginusae; by 405 many must have regretted the whole tragic sequence of events and this will have affected their response to *Iphigenia in Aulis*, regardless of when it was first written.

Iphigenia in Aulis uses its myth to explore peremptory life-and-death decisions by showing how, during a military crisis, several members of the same family took and rescinded decisions about the life of an innocent girl. Agamemnon has summoned her to be sacrificed, changes his mind, but is incapable of sticking to the better moral course out of fear for his own army. Menelaus changes his mind, emotionally rejecting his earlier 'logical' justifications of the atrocity when he sees his brother's distress. Even Achilles allows himself to be persuaded that Iphigenia wants to die. And Iphigenia herself, far from being the inconsistent character Aristotle alleged, or driven virtually into psychosis as has often been claimed, proves herself a typical, well-acclulturated Argive: she has internalized her community's behavioural patterns, becoming as morally unstable and vacillating in the face of well-tricked-out arguments as the strongest men in the Greek army, her father and uncle included.

Spin works best in a world with few external moral reference points, and insecurity about the nature or requirements of divinity. One strand in the play's reception since ancient times has been the view that it shows the evil effects of religious zealotry or superstition. This interpretation has an aetiology extending back to Lucretius, the ancient Epicurean polemicist, who after narrating the sacrifice at Aulis famously pronounced, 'so much evil can religion bring about' (*de Rerum Natura* 1.80–101). The absurd world depicted in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, relative even to the confused and disturbing metaphysical environments of most Greek tragedy, is astoundingly irreligious. Very little happens except that an oracular demand for human sacrifice, which was received, accepted and put into motion well *before* the beginning of the play, is actually carried out after the two key agents – the sacrificing father and the

sacrificed daughter – talk themselves into it. The crucial transformations do not take place on the level of action, or weather, or even Iphigenia's body, but exclusively in the minds of the leading characters. *Peitho* ('Persuasion') of a particularly sinister kind is seen to take effect. There is little emphasis on the oracle delivered by Calchas (indeed it is only summarized in *oratio obliqua* at 89–91), no discussion of it, no further omen, no angry bird, no visible epiphany of a god, no inspection of entrails. There is no guidance from any priestly figure, no divination of the will of heaven. There is no new communication from the gods during the course of the entire play (a point well brought out in Foley's analysis²⁸). Agamemnon even criticizes all seers as frauds, while failing to contest Calchas' faintly recalled pronouncement. This presentation of the myth implies that the suffering Iphigenia must undergo is not only entirely avoidable, but that it remains so until the eleventh hour.

The characters in *Iphigenia in Aulis* may be stranded in an absurdist ethical and metaphysical vacuum, with no way of discerning any meaning in their universe, but this does not mean that they need to *choose* to perform and suffer an inhumane atrocity. This is a play which will always speak loudest to an audience themselves characterized by intense, secularized moral *aporia*. No character can find a moral framework to help them identify and then adhere to their instinctive ethical reactions to what is happening – even Clytemnestra is ultimately persuaded out of her proposal to take a defiant last stand against Iphigenia's sacrifice (1459–60). The one exception is the old slave, an impressive individual who does seem to be capable of independent ethical intuition and steady resolve. It is very nearly true that in the world portrayed in *Iphigenia in Aulis* nobody does wrong with any great willingness (in ancient philosophical terms, half-heartedly demonstrating the truth of the Socratic principle that 'nobody does wrong willingly'), since, after reflection, both Agamemnon and Menelaus do think better of the sacrifice scheme. But they do not possess the moral vertebrae which would enable them to jeopardize their generalships in order to prevent it.

The devastation of mothers bereaved of their children presents an obvious link between *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Bacchae*, and if Manto played a role in *Alcmaeon in Corinth*, maternal misery may have featured there too. The parallelism between Clytemnestra and Agave's predicaments may have been further underlined if (as is likely) the two mothers were played by the same actor. The suffering portrayed in the closing episodes of *Bacchae*, when Agave comes to understand that she has brutally killed her own son, is in no way less intense than the suffering of Clytemnestra and Iphigenia in *Iphigenia in Aulis*. But the metaphysical basis for the suffering could not be presented more differently. We are left in considerable doubt about the divine endorsement of Iphigenia's sacrifice, and feel that Clytemnestra capitulates too quickly. In

Bacchae, on the other hand, Agave has no chance whatsoever to exercise free will or moral choice. The near-constant presence of Dionysus, his clear statement of his plan to wreck Thebes through its women, and the numerous miraculous 'signs and wonders' witnessed by the audience or reported to them, makes the divine control of events in *Bacchae* overwhelmingly explicit. The absolute inevitability of the suffering undergone by the Thebans, and the horror of the violence committed against Pentheus, the proof of the existence of god by signs and wonders experienced phenomenologically and sensually rather than through language, are closer to Antonin Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' than to any version of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. It is little surprise that practitioners of the 'Theatre of Cruelty' so often claim *Bacchae* as a linear ancestor, and indeed have sometimes staged pioneering performances of it.²⁹ The only Euripidean tragedy where characters have equivalently little room for manoeuvre is *Hippolytus*, in which the entire action is ordained by Aphrodite, as angry for being insulted by Hippolytus as Dionysus is angry for being denied by the Theban royal family in *Bacchae*.

The supernatural and miraculous element in the play is by no means confined to events which the spectators witness at first hand. Many marvels take place behind doors or outside the city walls on the mountains, but are described by awed reporters in awesome detail. The soldier who had first brought in the bound Dionysus, disguised as his own priest, reports that the women Pentheus had already imprisoned have miraculously escaped. Their fetters, apparently, fell spontaneously to the earth, and the bars keeping the prison doors closed slid back of their own accord: the soldier concludes, 'Yes, full of many wonders to thy land is this man come' (449–50).

In the first messenger speech Pentheus (who is already disoriented) hears what the Theban women have just been doing on Cithaeron (677–774). The narrative begins with strange and disturbing sights, although not supernatural ones, such as the live, hissing snakes the women used for girdles, and the breastfeeding of a fawn and a wolf cub by mothers of newborn. But then the miracles begin. At the touch of a thyrsus, fresh water spurts from rocks and wine from the earth. Milk is squeezed from the soil, and honey drips from thyrsuses. When the women sing, wild animals kneel in submission. The maenads acquire the supernatural strength to tear limbs from cattle with their bare hands. Then they attack a village, snatching children and carrying them, laughing, on their shoulders, with no need to hold them in place; they can break metal without incurring injury, and place flames in their hair without being burnt. The villagers find weapons useless against the bacchantes: the thyrsus alone, in the women's soft white hands, proves sufficient defence. No wonder the messenger concludes, 'Sure some God was in these things!' The second report from the mountain is far more unnerving (1043–1152).

The grotesque, sinister key is struck by the petrifying picture of Dionysus seating Pentheus on the branch of a pine tree he has bent, with his supernatural strength, to the ground, before carefully releasing it to lift the cross-dressed king to his parody of a throne above the tree-tops. This is followed by the god's disembodied voice, a pillar of flame, and a terrifying, windless silence, before the maenads launch their assault.

The spectator who witnessed *Bacchae* in performance was regaled with these gruesome, uncanny narratives but also directly presented with an unrelenting series of visible and audible proofs of the existence and ineluctable will of the divine Dionysus. It is appropriate that this essay concludes with the emphatic on-stage proofs of the power of Dionysus which the entire Athenian Dionysia was designed to celebrate. The young god's first words in the prologue proudly declare who he is – Dionysus, son of Zeus – now returned to his mother's homeland. The paranormal is already visible in the smoke which mysteriously never stops issuing from Semele's tomb. Dionysus has arrived in Greece, after teaching the rest of the world to celebrate the rites which prove and display him as 'manifest god'. He has already shown his power by sending the women of Thebes mad and sending them out from their homes to the mountainside. When he has proved to the doubting Pentheus that he is a god, Dionysus will proceed to other Greek cities to display the might of his godhead.

Cadmus and Teiresias, old men, feel the years melt away from them as they prepare to join the Bacchic rites – a magical rejuvenation which takes place before the audience's eyes (188–94). Dionysus is led off to the prison, and the maenadic chorus sing in his praise, but their ode is interrupted by the most spectacular miracle so far: a divine voice is heard from offstage, telling the maenads that it belongs to the child of Zeus and Semele; Dionysus' voice then calls for aid from the 'female spirit of the Earthquake' (585). And then an earthquake really does strike the palace, a seismic event somehow made apparent to the audience in the theatre, at the very least by sound effects and the reaction of the characters and chorus. This miracle is followed by the god's instruction to the fire on Semele's tomb to leap up, which it does (this would have been feasible with available stage technology in the late fifth century BC). Earthquake and flame are followed by the climactic third stage in this triple miracle. Dionysus, last seen bound and being led off to gaol, appears from the palace constrained by no fetters at all.

Dionysus, in the guise of his priest, now describes to the chorus how he has been mocking Pentheus inside. He has so altered the king's powers of perception that Pentheus bound a sacrificial bull, mistaking it for the priest. He also began to stab at the air with his sword, in a murderous rage, imagining he was attacking the priest: he was actually suffering a fit of psychotic delusion

(617–41). Dionysus' capacity to alter mental states at his will is best exemplified, however, in his two subsequent on-stage scenes with Pentheus, first when he persuades him to inspect the Bacchic rites for himself, and secondly when he puts the finishing touches to Pentheus' 'disguise' as a maenad. Dionysus' sinister mind-altering power could not be more graphically illustrated than by Pentheus' own description of his (false) consciousness: double vision, the hallucinated bull, and his feeling that he suddenly possesses superhuman physical strength. Pentheus leaves for the mountain, but the same dreadful power of the god to transform human consciousness is redoubled with the subsequent appearance of the delusional Agave, holding a head in her hands which she believes belongs to a lion when in fact it is her son's.

At the end of the play (1330), Dionysus appears, almost certainly in the theatrical machine, to gloat in his full godhead over the humiliation of the Thebans. Although we have unfortunately lost the section of the play in which Dionysus made his epiphany, and pronounced his judgement on the daughters of Cadmus, the text does resume mid-speech, when he turns to address the aged founder of Thebes himself. Dionysus' predictions show how far detached is the world of *Bacchae* from the realm of discernible human experience – the only realm dramatized in the doggedly anthropocentric *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Cadmus is to be transformed into a serpent, and to take with him his wife Harmonia (herself a superhuman creature from Olympus, daughter of the war-god Ares). They will travel on a cattle-drawn chariot, through eastern lands, and gather an army to lead against Greece (this motif must have reawakened the audience's memories of the processions which opened the Dionysia), before being translated to the Islands of the Blest. Finally, Agave and Cadmus desperately plead for some softening of the god's vindictive plans, but to no avail. These events are what Zeus ordained long ago (1349), we have experienced them through our senses as well as through language in a performance which has undermined our very ability to rely on the truth of our sense-perceptions, and no human word or action can change them: this is Euripides' prototype of the Theatre of Cruelty indeed.

Notes

- 1 Hall (1989), especially Ch. 3.
- 2 Winnington-Ingram (1997).
- 3 Segal (1986) 268–93.
- 4 See further Hall and Wyles (2008).
- 5 Braund (1993) 468–9.

- 6 Hall (2002) and (2006) 311–12.
- 7 Dittenberger (1960) no. 648B. See Eitrem, Amundsen, and Winnington-Ingram (1955) 27.
- 8 On which see Hall and Macintosh (2005) chs 11–13.
- 9 Jodrell (1781) vol. 2, 550.
- 10 Hall (2013) ch. 11.
- 11 Teevan (2004). On the process by which I translated the fragments and Teevan used them as a springboard for his new play, see my Introduction in that edition.
- 12 Haug (2012) 214.
- 13 Hall (2006) ch. 4, especially 105–11.
- 14 Hall (2006) 109, with further references.
- 15 See Michelakis (2002).
- 16 See further Pearson (1917) 69, 130.
- 17 See Webster (1967) 257–8.
- 18 Philemon fr. 118 and Axionicus fr. 3 *PCG*.
- 19 For English translations of the sources, a papyrus (*The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 2737, fr. 1, col. ii), and a fragment of a comedy by Cratinus (*PCG* F 17) see Csapo and Slater (1995) 135 no. 71, and 108, no. 1.
- 20 The sources for this information, Aeschines *Against Ctesiphon* 66–7, ancient scholars' comments, and Plato, *Symposium* 194, are translated in Csapo and Slater (1995) 109–10, nos. 4–7.
- 21 The source for this information, an ancient scholar's comment on Aristophanes' *Acharnians* 243, is translated in Csapo and Slater (1995) 110 no. 9.
- 22 See the sources as translated in Csapo and Slater (1995) 111–12, nos. 10–14.
- 23 Csapo and Slater (1995) 112–13, nos. 15–16.
- 24 See Goldhill (1987).
- 25 Hall (2013) ch. 4.
- 26 Reinhardt (1957). The best introduction to the 'Theatre of the Absurd' remains Esslin (2001).
- 27 I elaborate this interpretation further in Hall (2005).
- 28 Foley (1982).
- 29 The theoretical groundwork of the 'Theatre of Cruelty' is Artaud (1958); for the genealogy connecting *Bacchae* with this school of avant-garde theatre practice, see e.g. Sutherland (1968) 87–8 and Zarrilli (2010) 516.