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PENTHEUS IN THE MIRROR: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF EURIPIDES' *BACCHAE*

Since the publication of Vernant's seminal *Oedipus without the Complex*,¹ attempts to prevent psychoanalysis from infiltrating classical literature have been arising in classical scholarship.² In the case of Euripides' *Bacchae*, Gregory's article, one of the strongest retorts to psychoanalysis, protested against the interpretation of the Euripidean play as centered on Pentheus' psychological self. Gregory argued that the motif of seeing should not be trivialized in a search for Pentheus' voyeurism, but should be rather seen as the signal of the tragedian's concern with epistemology.³ Gregory seems to share with Vernant both a structuralist approach to secular-religious polarity⁴ and a disbelief that structuralism and psychoanalysis can be reconciled in the same text.

Gregory's interpretative framework needs not be discarded altogether. Much more, however, should be said about Euripides' tragedy by embracing the advantages of both structuralist and psychoanalytic methodologies. It is Segal's great distinction to have demonstrated the perfect compatibility and reciprocal support of these two methodologies,⁵ and I adopt

¹ Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Oedipus without the Complex," in *Myth and Tragedy*, Edited by Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981).

² Vered Lev Kenaan, *The Ancient Unconscious: Psychoanalysis and Classical Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 9-11.

³Justina Gregory, "Some Aspects of Seeing in Euripides' *Bacchae*." *Greece & Rome* 32, no. 1 (1985): 28 *et passim*.

⁴ *Ibid*, 29.

⁵ Charles P. Segal, "Pentheus and Hippolytus on the Couch and on the Grid: Psychoanalytic and Structuralist Readings of Greek Tragedy." *Classical World* 72, no. 3 (Nov. 1978): 129-31.

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his mixed approach in the following analysis of the *Bacchae*. For while Gregory is right in detecting an epistemological anxiety in the *Bacchae*, this does not exclude the possibility that Euripides reflects on the psyche of Pentheus, on its unity, on its isolation, and on its annihilation.

This essay will examine the *Bacchae* by deploying Lacan's psychoanalytical studies. In examining the interaction between Pentheus and Dionysus, I argue that Pentheus' identity metamorphoses long before line 810, which is usually taken in scholarship to signal the beginning of the Dionysiac psychic invasion. While Euripides was of course no Lacanian, I use Lacan as a heuristic tool to think with and to parallel the dynamics of psychic invasion in the play. Following the recent semantic reappraisal of Dionysus' famous ἄ at 810, what follows evaluates the possibility that Euripides has constructed Dionysiac invasion long before that line, in a passage whose significance could be best understood by resorting to Lacanian theory.

It is a truism of scholarship on the *Bacchae* that Pentheus' character changes about halfway through the play: the stern, rationalist ruler of Thebes turns into a Dionysiac, effeminate initiand that is being possessed by Bacchic ἐνθουσία.⁶ But madness, or divine possession, does not entail the rejection of a psychological account: one can only think of Plato's *Phaedrus* and the sophisticated interest of the philosopher in the reaction of the psyche to a beautiful boy, explained through a mechanistic process that is nonetheless

⁶ Mikel Labiano, "Greek interjectional ἄ = "Stop doing that!" in Euripides." *Glotta*, Bd.93 (2017): 37.

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identified as “divine madness.”⁷ Given the frequently noticed “systematic dramatization of ‘encountering the other’” in the *Bacchae*⁸ and the crucial role of otherness in Lacanian psychoanalysis, I suggest that we turn to Lacan’s psychoanalytical theorization of a “mirror stage” in the development of human identity to acknowledge Pentheus’ psychological metamorphosis.

Although different versions of his theory survive,⁹ the 1977 version of Lacan’s *Écrits* defines the “mirror stage” as a phase in the psychological development of the child that occurs between the first six and eighteen months of the child’s life—a period of paramount significance that serves to develop the child’s identity. According to Lacan, when the child is placed before a mirror, he perceives himself for the first time as “Object rather than the only Subject in the universe.”¹⁰ In contrast to his perception of the world before, conceiving no self but a wholeness indistinctive of boundaries with the “external” world, the child, for the first time in his life, sees himself as separate from the world and conceives himself as a unitary self, an unfragmented individual. This assumption is ultimately a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) based on an identification with the idealized mirrored self.¹¹

⁷ Eric R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 231.

⁸ Simon Goldhill, “Doubling and Recognition in the *Bacchae*.” *Mètis*, Vol. 3, No.1-2 (1988): 143.

⁹ Elisabeth Roudinesco, “The Mirror Stage: an Obliterated Archive,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Edited by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 29-30.

¹⁰ Leni Marshall, “Through (with) the Looking Glass: Revisiting Lacan and Woodward in “Méconnaissance”, the Mirror Stage of Old Age.” *Feminist Formations* 24, No.2 (Summer 2012): 54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

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The *stade du miroir* provides the psychological fundamentals for the individual's future social interactions, for there will be future identifications with other individuals. These will play the function of metaphorical mirrors,¹² and indeed it will be the encounter with the Other, "not annihilating but the key to self-consciousness," that molds and constitutes the self.¹³ A misrecognition of oneself as the idealized Other is fundamental to the construction of our own selves, for Lacan believes, in contrast to constitutionalism, that "the entire personality, which interacts with a social milieu, is the product of social activity. The self emerges from social interaction."¹⁴

It is indeed striking that Euripides strives to present Dionysus as the specular image of Pentheus. They are both Cadmus' grandsons, yet one is Agave's son and the other Semele's (Agave and Semele being described as conflictual; cf. vv.26-34). One is the offspring of the king of the gods, the other has bestial origins, connected to the myth of Theban autochthony (vv.541-44). Dionysus represents the effeminate foreigner (vv.13-19; 233-38), Pentheus is the Greek ruler promoting Greekness (v.483), traditional masculinity, and standard gender conventions (vv.260-2). The former is a god, the latter espouses a type of exacerbated intellectualism that seems to hinder him from seeing "with the eyes of faith."¹⁵ The etymology of Διθύραμβος, a Dionysiac epithet – so Euripides

¹²Ibid.

¹³ Thomas K. Hubbard, "Pindar, Theoxenus, and the Homoerotic Eye." *Arethusa* 35, No.2 (Spring 2002): 287.

¹⁴ Eleni Boliaki, "Ancient Greek drama, postmodern psychoanalysis and fundamental ambiguity: Euripides and Lacan," (Ph.D. thesis, Syracuse University, 2000), 73.

¹⁵ Gregory, "Some Aspects of Seeing," 29; Eur. *Bacch.* 501-2.

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wants us to believe – conceals the god’s divine birth,¹⁶ while Pentheus’ name foreshadows his death (v.508).

Their vision of existence and knowledge is so diametrically dichotomic that we may argue that the tragic core of the play resides, as in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, in the epistemological fracture between the reasoning of the gods and the language of men,¹⁷ and in the ultimate impossibility for these perspectives to be reconciled. This, however, can hardly suffice to fully capture the nature of the confrontations between Dionysus and Pentheus, and we should be wary of following Gregory and applying the same Hegelian fondness of antithesis to the *Bacchae*.

In contrast to Antigone and Creon, who are incapable of penetrating each other’s view of life, the puzzling novelty of Euripides’ play lies in the outcome of the continuous clashes and confrontations between Dionysus and Pentheus. It is normal in Greek tragedy for such ideological clashes to be unfruitful: the incapacity of Antigone and Creon, for instance, to understand and assimilate each other’s point of view tragically leads to disaster. In the *Bacchae*, instead, at the end of these confrontations, Pentheus’ character and vision of the world turn out to have undergone a radical metamorphosis, one that can be explained by a literal Dionysiac ἐνθουσία and that can be paralleled with the concrete ritual experience of Bacchic initiands thought to be possessed by Bacchus.¹⁸ How does

¹⁶ Eric R. Dodds, *Euripides/Bacchae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 143; Eur. *Bacch.* 526.

¹⁷ Charles P. Segal, *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 142 *et passim*.

¹⁸ Chris Carey, “Looking at the Bacchae in *Bacchae*,” in *Looking at Bacchae*, Edited by David Stuttard (London: Bloomsbury Publishing,

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Pentheus change, and when? I argue that in one of these confrontations we can identify the beginning of the psychological metamorphosis of Pentheus that could be described in terms of a Lacanian mirror stage.

The first concrete encounter between Pentheus and Dionysus (vv. 450-518) opens with Pentheus' captivated attention lingering on the seductive physicality of the god. This is presented to the audience not only as the first encounter with Dionysus, but the first real confrontation and opposition. That is to say, this is the first time that Pentheus' identity is strongly questioned by an "Other" that is idealized in Lacanian terms.¹⁹

This picture of Pentheus' psychological identity as unquestioned before the encounter is enriched by an unparalleled dramaturgical choice of Euripides, namely that of introducing a chorus of completely foreign women who have no relationship with Pentheus whatsoever. Pentheus, Euripides emphasizes, is absolutely alone in his ideological fight,²⁰ and his psychological state remains untroubled and unquestioned (contrarily to many other tragedies, where the chorus not only sympathize with but also oppose the character of the protagonist).²¹

2016), 79; Richard Seaford, "Dionysiac Drama and the Dionysiac Mysteries." *The Classical Quarterly* 31, No.2 (1981): 256 *et passim*.

¹⁹ For the contrast with Cadmus and Teiresias provided Pentheus with no possibility for Lacanian "identification" or "idealization", but only trivialization, both intradiegetic and extradiegetic. The whole vignette appeared to be a 'masterpiece of satire': Reginald P. Winnington-Ingram, *Euripides and Dionysus: An Interpretation of the Bacchae* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), 48.

²⁰ Carey, *Looking at the Bacchae*, 73.

²¹ Sheila Murnaghan, "The Daughters of Cadmus: Chorus and Characters in Euripides' *Bacchae* and *Ion*." *BICS*, Vol. 49, No. 87 (2006): 111. Against the Aristotelian and scholarly view that Euripidean choruses are *always* detached from the plot cf. Martin

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Dionysus, instead, represents for Pentheus the perfect Other for misrecognition: he is Pentheus' own 'semblance' (misrecognition with an Other happens especially with a 'semblant character')²² while still being different, antithetical, even 'the incarnation of quintessential otherness' for the king.²³ Differently from Cadmus and Teiresias, Dionysus captures Pentheus' attention and is hence closely scrutinised.

Notice how subtly Dionysus holds up the Lacanian mirror in this passage by slowly turning the looking glass over to reflect Pentheus. At the beginning of the passage, Dionysus is the object of Pentheus' gaze, who seems fully in control of the objectifying visual process (450ff). His physical appearance, itemized in the very first lines of the passage by Pentheus himself, is again the subject of close inspection in lines 492-7, where Pentheus even goes as far as describing his βόστροϋον ("hair") as ἄβρὸν ("graceful"; 493).²⁴ Such closeness of Pentheus' attention, however, is troubled by the radical otherness and opposition of the god. Responding in Amoeborean guise to the questions and statements of the Theban king, Dionysus opposes and questions Pentheus' subjectivity for the first time in the play. Pentheus vomits on Dionysus his vision of

Cropp, "The Tactful Chorus: Euripides, *Alcestis*, 326-327, *Hecuba*, 846-849." *Mouseion*, Vol. 17 (2020); Martin Hose, *Studien Zum Chor Bei Euripides I, II* (Stuttgart: De Gruyter, 1990). It is to be noted, moreover, that even if Euripides' choruses were generally detached from the plot, they usually meet the protagonists. This does not happen in the *Bacchae* (the Asian Bacchants, however, do meet Dionysus).

²² Boliaki, "Ancient Greek drama," 66-7.

²³ Antoni Bierl, "Maenadism as Self-Referential Choralitv in Euripides' *Bacchae*," in *Choral Mediations in Greek Tragedy*, Edited by Renaud Gagné and Marianne Govers Hopman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14.

²⁴ All translations are mine.

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the world, untainted until now by any alterity or contrasting subjectivity, like a child before the occurrence of the mirror stage would do. And yet, while Pentheus looks at him, Dionysus 'looks back'.

The intense stichomythia challenges the character and beliefs of Pentheus for the very first time: to Pentheus' racist assertion about the barbarians that φρονουσι γὰρ κάκιον Ἑλλήνων πολὺ ("for they are far less wise than the Greeks"; 483), Dionysus replies τὰδ' εὖ γε μᾶλλον: οἱ νόμοι δὲ διάφοροι ("in this regard, much wiser, instead: it is only their customs that are different"; 484). Whereas Pentheus believes the night to be ἐς γυναῖκας δόλιόν...καὶ σαθρόν ("treacherous and unsound...for women"; 487), Dionysus retorts: κὰν ἡμέρα τὸ γ' αἰσχρὸν ἐξεύροι τις ἄν ("one could devise shameful things even during the day"; 488).

In the final Amoebean distich, the spotlight is finally turned onto Pentheus: the king threatens Bacchus and alleges that δίκην σε δοῦναι δεῖ σοφισμάτων κακῶν ("you must be punished for your evil sophisms"; 489). To which, the god responds: σὲ δ' ἀμαθίας γε κάσεβοῦντ' ἐς τὸν θεὸν ("and you must be punished for your ignorance and sacrilege"; 490). The power dynamics of the Gaze, apparently firmly fixed and established at the beginning, have changed. The Subject has become Object for the first time. Pentheus' own obsession for the Gaze is overturned by Dionysus at 500ff., when he slyly seduces his cousin to ask where the god is, as he is not φανερός ὄμμασιν ("manifest to [his] eyes"; 501). σὺ δ' ἀσεβῆς αὐτὸς ὦν οὐκ εἰσορᾷς ("you cannot see him, because you are impious"; 502) – Dionysus replies. By subtly remarking that he cannot see, Dionysus is sanctioning the final reversal of the power

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dynamics inherent in the gaze at the beginning of the scene. He finally strikes his last blow by telling Pentheus that he is ignorant of who he really is: οὐκ οἶσθ' ὅ τι ζῆς, οὐδ' ὃ δρᾶς, οὐδ' ὅστις εἶ ("you do not know what your life is, or what you are doing, or who you are"; 506). Just like the specular image of a mirror before the Lacanian child, Dionysus compels Pentheus to look at Pentheus' self through his semblant image.

For the first time in the play, Pentheus perceives himself as Object rather than Subject, for "people's responses to an individual can serve as social mirrors, which perform similar functions to an inanimate looking glass."²⁵ This is just the beginning of the paradoxical process of psychological identification of Pentheus with Dionysus, an idealized and specular Other to the I of Pentheus.

That such an interaction between Pentheus and Dionysus should be understood as identification rather than conflict is proven not only by the metamorphosis of Pentheus' identity, but also by his previous fascination with Dionysus (which is, in fact, virtually absent from the interaction with Cadmus and Teiresias, and cannot be detected in other tragic conflicts elsewhere). Such fascination can be explained in different ways, and it is impossible here to survey all of the hypotheses. However, Seaford may be right in suggesting that Dionysus represents what Pentheus has repressed within himself and banished from the constructed image of his identity, and hence that 'Pentheus' fascination with Dionysos is fascination with himself'.²⁶ Paradoxically enough, it is because

²⁵ Marshall, "Through (with) the Looking Glass," 54.

²⁶ Richard Seaford, *Euripides. Bacchae* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1996), 34.

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Dionysus is (at least partly) an anti-Pentheus that such identification can happen and Pentheus' identity can transform into Dionysus'. With some level of tragic irony, and just before falling into the definitive trap of Bacchus, the king of Thebes acknowledges that his identity is becoming increasingly entwined with the god's as Dionysus speaks: ἀπόρῳ γε τῷδε συμπεπλέγμεθα ξένῳ /ὄς οὔτε πάσχων οὔτε δρῶν σιγήσεται ("what an unmanageable stranger I have become entwined with! He will not keep silent, neither when he suffers nor when he does something!"; 800-1).

Whether explained psychologically or merely in ritualistic terms as divine possession, this assimilation leads Pentheus' character to change profoundly by 810, when Dionysus' famous ᾄ will sanction that the transition has been finalized. While the scene undoubtedly contains the Aristotelian περιπέτεια of the play and discriminates between two different versions of Pentheus,²⁷ Dionysus' power has not merely overwhelmed his opponent's psyche in a pivotal moment.

Lines 450-518 already activated the psychological metamorphosis of the Theban king through a physical and ideological confrontation with an idealized, Dionysiac Other that can be described as a Lacanian *stade du miroir*. From that moment, traces of Dionysiac initiation are already encapsulated in Pentheus' hallucinations – a bull, a fire, a phantom of Dionysus himself (vv. 616-31). Bacchic identity has already penetrated Pentheus' subconscious and is subtly proliferating and growing so as to transfigure Pentheus' identity – a process

²⁷ Alfred H. Cruickshank, *Euripides. Bacchae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893), 41; Henri Grégoire, *Euripide Les Bacchantes* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1968), 274; Seaford, *Euripides. Bacchae*, 213.

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of “psychic invasion” that will find its termination and accomplishment, rather than its commencement,²⁸ in Dionysus’ prohibitive $\tilde{\alpha}$, “Stop!”²⁹

A question, haunting and pressing, still looms in the background. If Pentheus re-constructs his identity by virtue of a *méconnaissance* with Dionysus’ being, and if this is the actual basis of the construction of the self, why does this psychological metamorphosis bring about Pentheus’ death? A moment that could prove unique in all extant tragedy, in which two opposite characters on stage resolve their epistemological and ethical contrast through the psychological assimilation of one to the other’s perspective, fails to prove successful. Pentheus’ self-recognition as Dionysus brings about his own demise. Why so?

The problem with Dionysus constituting the Lacanian Other lies in the dissolutive power that Dionysiac essence has over identity and those same boundaries that have become definite by the very first occurrence of the mirror stage. Dionysus’ identity eludes any dichotomic categorization in that it does not occupy one pole of the polarities that define identity, but shifts seamlessly and continuously from one to the other.³⁰ Dionysus is not simply a symbol of fixed irrationality, divine power, and of every type of identification – in terms of gender,

²⁸ Dodds, *Euripides/Bacchae*, 172. Dodds himself seems to lend support to my argument, even if he speaks of this scene as the beginning of the psychic initiation, rather than the final stage. Quite in contradiction with this idea, Dodds admits, indeed, that Pentheus is being betrayed by “the Dionysiac longing in himself”, which had been “skilfully excited by the Stranger (475).”

²⁹ Labiano, “Greek Interjectional $\tilde{\alpha}$,” 45-6.

³⁰ Arlene W. Saxonhouse, “Freedom, Form, and Formlessness: Euripides’ *Bacchae* and Plato’s *Republic*.” *American Political Science Association* 108, No.1 (2014): 89-90.

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ethnicity, age – that stands in contrast with the stern categorizations and delimitations set by the oppressive world of Thebes.³¹

Rather, Euripides emphasizes from the beginning and reiterates later on (in the scene of the “mirror”) that Dionysus is neither Greek nor Asian, but rather Lydian (vv.13-4; 464), a notoriously ambiguous ethnic categorization at least since Herodotus’ Λύδιος λόγος³² that eluded too strict an identification as either Greek or barbarian. While Dionysus’ masculine side is made perspicuous by Pentheus’ lapidary observation that he is οὐκ ἄμορφος...ὡς ἐς γυναῖκας (“not unattractive...for women”; vv. 453-4), the king is mesmerized by his womanish πλόκαμός...ταναός (“long flowing locks”; v. 455), λευκήν...χροιάν (“pale skin”; v. 457), and οἰνώπας ὄσσοις χάριτας Ἀφροδίτης (“the wine-dark beauty of Aphrodite”; v. 236).

Lacan believes rigid boundaries to be of paramount significance to corroborate and sustain the false misrecognition that one has of oneself as “whole” after the mirror stage and following identifications with the Other in adulthood.³³ Dionysus’ essence is not simply a twin personality. As Segal brilliantly puts it, he embodies two different and contrastive personalities at once, “a threat to psychological essence and integration” of Pentheus, and to “the rigidly masculine value-system” that

³¹ Charles P. Segal, “Euripides’ Bacchae: Conflict and Mediation.” *Ramus* 6, No. 2 (1977): 103; Winnington-Ingram, *Euripides and Dionysus*, 176-7.

³² Hdt. 1. 94, 35, 74; Francesca Gazzano, “L’Oriente Vicino: le tradizioni sulla Lidia nello specchio di Erodoto.” *Erga/Logoi* 5, No.2 (2017): 48.

³³ Marshall, “Through (with) the Looking Glass,” 54.

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Pentheus, and ultimately Thebes, espouses.³⁴ Pentheus' identification with Dionysus as Other is problematic, for Dionysus himself represents a dissolution of boundaries and a subsequent dissolution of identity.³⁵

This is the psychological threat that not only brings about the metamorphosis of Pentheus into a "crypto-Dionysus",³⁶ but also determines Pentheus' failure to escape his status of transient "liminality",³⁷ one between adolescence and manhood. During this "liminal" stage, identity is restructured to pass over to manhood yet should only temporarily comprehend dichotomic, opposite tensions within itself. Pentheus' Lacanian identification with Dionysus crystallizes him in a liminal psychological condition that symbolizes his failure to transition to manhood. Because of this, Pentheus regresses to a psychological condition predating the stage in which boundaries are set and where "Pentheus," as an individual, was psychologically formed, i.e., before the mirror stage.

Pentheus' identity, rather than transitioning into a structured and adult one, regresses hence to a status that precedes the construction of identity – a psychological destruction that is mirrored by his physical dismemberment. Paradoxically, this has been accomplished through the identification with an Other, a process that should constitute the basis of identity rather than its annihilation. The idealized Other with which Pentheus identifies in Euripides' play is no regular

³⁴ Charles P. Segal, "The Menace of Dionysus: Sex Roles and Reversals in Euripides' *Bacchae*." *Arethusa* 11, No.1 (Spring 1978): 188.

³⁵ Seaford, *Euripides. Bacchae*, 31.

³⁶ Segal, "Euripides' *Bacchae*: Conflict and Mediation," 105.

³⁷ Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," in *The Forest of Symbols, Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1967), 95 *et passim*.

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Other: he is Dionysus, the god that destroys boundaries and reveals the true nature of human essence – not a coherent whole, but a tragic body made up of conflictual, dichotomic forces always in flux within each of us.

Segal is right, I think, in reading here Dionysus as a meta-theatrical symbol for tragedy. In contrast to Lévi-Strauss' view of the function of myth as mediating polarities, tragedy revolves around the destruction of boundaries and the collapse of polarities themselves.³⁸ If we were to accept such a metatheatrical reading with Segal, it would be finally tantalizing to ask: what moral judgment transpiring from the portrayal of Dionysus, and consequently of tragedy, was the audience offered? I leave the matter unsolved, and wonder whether anyone, following Pentheus, might ever manage to categorize, shackle, and immobilize Dionysus' essence – in my opinion, one that avoids human categorization, and ultimately stands beyond good and evil.

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³⁸ Segal, "Euripides' Bacchae: Conflict and Mediation," 104-5.

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